

Akamitsu Awamura

Illustrator: **mmu**

She's the
Cutest...
But We're
Just
Friends!

2





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Kai Nakamura

A second-year
in high school.

A boy who pursues his
many hobbies with the
utmost of passion.

He met Jun just after
his high school's entrance
ceremony, and since
their hobbies lined
up perfectly, she became
his best friend.

Jun Miyakawa

A second-year
in high school.

A popular student
said to be the prettiest
girl in her grade.

Kai's girl friend from
heaven who can connect
with him across a
wide variety of genres.



Kotobuki Hotei

A first-year
in high school.
A girl friend of
Kai's from work.
A newbie with
a devilish smile to
hide her crumbling
self-confidence.
It turns out that
she...likes Kai?!



Reina Fujisawa

A second-year
in high school.
A friend of Jun's
who's said to be the
prettiest woman
in her grade.
Kai has her respect,
as a friend.



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Prologue

It was Sunday at a food court filled with shoppers and their families. Kai, aka Ash Nakamura, was settled into his seat at a tiny plastic table as he engaged in a jovial one-on-one chat. His conversation partner was a girl one year younger than him who was a newbie at his job.

She was also, to be frank, beautiful. Her expression often defaulted to a bratty smile, which was elevated to having an almost devilish allure by the preposterously perfect proportions of her face. And yet, she still had a regal elegance to her, maybe due to the straight, black hair that extended to her hips. It had a lovely sheen that was plain for all to see, as though an artisan had poured their soul into polishing each strand day and night. And her name was Kotobuki Hotei.

Kai watched her poshly pinch the tip of her straw as though it were the fancy beverage of a hipster cafe instead of a cheap paper cup filled with grapefruit juice. Somehow, he didn't find the sight obnoxious; if anything, he found it picture-perfect.

"You sure know how to make that drink look tasty," Kai teased with a chuckle.

"I take it that you wish to have a sip?"

Far from showing irritation, Kotobuki gave a clear response in the strange, listless tone she had made her own. She had only started working three months ago, so she was still a beginner unaccustomed to the polite speech needed for customer service jobs.

She pushed the tip of her straw at Kai with a smug look on her face, a display of confidence not shared by the rest of her body language. Kai followed his coworker's example and shifted to the same listless tone before replying.

"I'm afraid I must refrain. It's merely grapefruit juice, correct?"

"Oh, this is no 'mere' juice. This is grapefruit juice that has been blessed by the lips of a beauty. What greater treasure can you imagine?"

“You don’t mean to suggest it enhances the flavor, do you?”

“Perhaps you should give it a try to find out?”

“Even though it would result in what many call an ‘indirect kiss’?”

“This is a roundabout way of stating that I would like an indirect kiss. Please don’t ask me to say that up front; it’d be far too embarrassing.”

“Have you always been hiding such a prurient personality?”

“What you call ‘hiding’ is what I prefer to call ‘being ladylike.’”

“All in the eyes of the beholder, I see.”



“I think my razor-sharp wit deserves some commendation,” said Kotobuki as she beamed with obnoxious pride. Sure, she wore that cute expression unfairly well, but Kai couldn’t bring himself to hate her either way.

“Since I’m the one who requested this first date of ours,” Kotobuki continued, “I figured I should endeavor to play up the romantic atmosphere. Was the stimulation a tad strong for one as juvenile as yourself?”

She sighed and patronizingly shrugged her shoulders as though she were the adult of the pair. It was clear from her eyes that she was looking down on her date. Until...

“Well, if you insist, I’ll take you up on your indirect kiss.”

“Whafgaughuh?!”

Kai casually tilted his neck forward to sip from her straw, but Kotobuki yelped and pulled back in a panic. The air of superiority she had a moment ago vanished with the wind as she flushed beet red down to her neck.

“Oh? Whatever might be the matter, Kotobuki?”

“N-Nakamura, you bully.”

“Was it not you who requested the indirect kiss?”

“You’re a bully.”

Kai continued to lean forward towards her straw, so Kotobuki frantically shuffled the cup left and right in her hands to evade his advances.

Did she really not expect me to call her bluff? thought Kai. *The fool. Those tricks might have worked on me in middle school, but my willpower has been steeled by the past year of casual physical contact with my girl friend!*

“Why do you run, Kotobuki? Allow me to savor the straw that’s been graced by your lovely lips. Quickly now!”

“N-Nakamura, you’re a pervert. Your phrasing is simply depraved.”

“I’m merely moved by your earnest efforts and wish to cooperate in playing up the romantic atmosphere.”

“Who would ever call this *remotely* romantic?!”

Kai had only teased her on a whim, but Kotobuki blushed the whole time as she aggressively argued back.

The truth was that Kotobuki had the mental stability of a wet paper bag. Sure, she could be obnoxious, but her frequent feigning of maturity and trash talking were just desperate attempts to maintain her composure. She probably thought she was doing a good job at hiding it, but too bad! Kai could see right through her. No matter how snooty her grin or snide her advice, he just had to chuckle. He couldn't hate her; in fact, it just made her cuter.

"Ooooooh," whined Kotobuki as she finally retracted her hands and hid her cup behind her back.

"You don't gotta go that far," chortled Kai as he slipped back into his typical tone to poke fun at her.

Meanwhile, Kotobuki strained to hide the guilty look on her face. She looked up at Kai with a glare and said, "This is necessary to defend my chastity. I'm fighting with all my might."

"Your chastity, you say."

Kai couldn't help but chuckle at that one. *And she says I'm the juvenile one*, he thought, unable to bear the irony. But it made him realize that Kotobuki really was an innocent little girl; her immunity to the opposite sex wasn't nearly as strong as she boasted. There was a range of jokes and puns that were sure to be fine, but...

I'd better be careful not to cross the line, Kai told himself. It was a reminder that he had to take special care in minding his manners; his experience with women wasn't vast enough to let him do so without effort.

Episode 001: I Might Be Dating the (Emotionally Unstable) Black-Haired Beauty, Kotobuki

It had all started about two weeks ago, during the latter half of Golden Week. Kai was in the break room at work when Kotobuki suddenly asked him out.

“N-N-N-No way, do you actually like me?!”

“Um, well, er, you see... yes.”

That was it. No setting the mood, no buildup, just an ambush. Their conversation started off with Kai looking to thank Kotobuki for all the advice she gave him, but when she suggested they see a movie, go shopping together, and eat at a restaurant, he noticed a strange pattern.

How had it come to this? Kai froze in shock, stiff as a statue. Kotobuki was a newbie who was hired just that February, so they’d known each other for a grand total of three months. True, Kai was sort of a mentor to her at work, and his conversations with her were the deepest he’d had with anyone on the job. And it was also true that Kotobuki was a huge anime fan, so they got along well. But Kai only saw her as a good friend at work. He never expected that Kotobuki would be the one who’d have a thing for him! Not that he was necessarily complaining, but it still struck him like a bolt from the blue.

“Uh... Um... Nakamura?” Kotobuki beseeched the man made of marble before her. Her voice wavered and her eyes shifted to and fro. “What...might...your response be?”

Her cautiously asked question brought Kai back to the world of flesh and blood. Kotobuki may have gone with the momentum of the moment, but this nervous wreck of a newbie *had* summoned the courage to confess her feelings to him. Kai’s man card would be as good as revoked if he didn’t give her the decency of a response.

“I-I’ll be honest,” stammered Kai. It was his first time being asked out by someone of the opposite sex, and by such a cute one at that, so his pitch shot up in panic.

“Y-Yes, pwease,” stuttered Kotobuki, stiff as a defendant waiting for a judge’s verdict. Her voice was scratchy and her eyes were bulging.

“To be honest...”

“R-Right, please be honest...”

“It...doesn’t feel real.”

“So you actually hate me?!” Kotobuki’s eyes watered in shock.

“Absolutely not!” corrected Kai, desperate to calm the small, sobbing, and shaking creature he knew as his coworker. “I like you, Kotobuki. But you know that thing in manga where a guy isn’t sure if he ‘likes someone as a woman,’ right? To be honest, I don’t know either. I don’t know the different kinds of likes. So, uh, that’s why I don’t think I can go out with you sorry!” he blurted out, his words running together. “But I like you!”

Kai scrambled to lay all of his thoughts on the table. He could never hate Kotobuki; for his sake and hers, he had to make that as clear as he could. Letting her get the idea that he thought she was pathetic or lame wasn’t an option.

“O-Okay, Nakamura, I understand your feelings. Just...don’t gush about how much you like me. You’re making me blush...”

Kotobuki breathed a sigh of relief. Shortly after, her cheeks began to redden. She stared off into space as though she was too embarrassed to look at Kai’s face any longer.

Kai found every step of this process adorable. He could never bring himself to hate her.

“In that case,” suggested Kotobuki, her body fidgeting as she continued averting her gaze, “shall we have a date anyway?”

“Isn’t going on a date when we’re not gonna be an item...er, a tad questionable?” Kai’s brain was still scattered, so he responded with a mix of his typical tone and the vocabulary he used for Kotobuki.

“May I inquire as to what about it is so questionable?”

“It should be obvious. It would feel insincere, as though I were leading you on.”

“Nakamura,” said Kotobuki smugly, “I believe you read too much manga.” She was getting back to her usual pace.

“May I inquire as to what you mean by that?”

“I don’t believe there’s anything insincere about merely going on a date simply because you’re uncertain whether or not you’ll become lovers. In fact, you could say it’s a more realistic proposition for the both of us to have a chance at testing our compatibility.”

“Indeed, you have a point.” Kai still couldn’t quite wrap his head around it, but he could potentially change his tune about Kotobuki as they continued to go on dates.

“In fact, *you* could be the one who disappoints *me*.”

“Yes, an excellent point!” So excellent that Kai accepted her argument before he had the chance to take offense.

This was Kotobuki’s chance to drive it home. She placed her hands on her chest and asked, “Nakamura, am I not cute?”

The way she said that with a straight face would seem obnoxious to someone who didn’t know her well.

“Yes, I think you are very cute.”

“R-Right, of course.”

The way her eyes darted around the moment she was agreed with could lead that same someone to think she was an emotional trainwreck.

“Do you not find the proposition of dating someone as cute as I to be quite the bargain?”

“To the point of being a fire sale, if not an act of philanthropy.”

“I find it questionable that you would debase yourself so, but either way, how could you possibly let such a golden opportunity slip away?”

“Indeed, it would take much contemplation to find a good reason.”

“And you don’t have any other lovers, correct? Not even any potential partners to point to?”

“In fact, I’ve been without a girlfriend for sixteen years.”

“Then would a date with me present any problems?”

“Hmmm,” said Kai as he crossed his arms. Truth be told, there was still one; this was the fact that Kai considered the very prospect of romantic relationships to be exhausting. No matter how cute the girl, he’d rather be friends than lovers. The commotion of the past few weeks had made that abundantly clear to him.

On the other hand, Kai thought, Kotobuki wants a relationship so much that I feel like we’d be talking past each other if I said that...

“It’s merely a date to me,” Kotobuki continued. “I won’t demand responsibility or the like from you after the fact. I promise you this.”

Kai would be nothing more than a coward to force a younger girl to pour her heart out like that and still turn her away.

“Okay,” said Kai as he uncrossed his arms. “Guess we’ll go on a date.”

He went back to his natural tone and accepted. Kotobuki’s face immediately lit up...but she soon directed her smile to the floor.

“...I’m happy,” she whispered. She dropped her stiff, listless tone too, now sounding as though she was savoring the moment. Kotobuki Hotei was obnoxious and emotionally unstable, but more than anything else, she was adorable.



This brings us to today, the first date between Kai and Kotobuki. The location? Tycoon City. For people who lived in Sakata City like Kai and Kotobuki, there were typically two options for people who wanted to get their shopping on. The first was to take the train all the way to Tokyo, and the second was to make do with a more local shopping mall. For those choosing the latter, their destination was Tycoon City. Sure, comparisons to Tokyo Summerland would be punching

above its weight, but T-City was an extravagant enough building that it was almost wasted on a locale as remote as Sakata.

Still, it was the pride of the region. It boasted over two hundred shops and restaurants, an arcade lined with cabinets of all the latest games, a movie theater that was still spick-and-span from its renovation three years ago, the largest bookstore in the prefecture, and even a local hobby store chain that looked like a Yellow Submarine knockoff. It was a trendy spot that was charitable enough to satisfy Kai's otaku spirit.

It found no shortage of ways to utilize its real estate; from its walkways to its store spaces to its frequent rest stops, there was always room to breathe. It had plenty of elevators too. This gave it a leg up on its cramped city-based counterparts; shoppers who brought their families often preferred T-City.

And this Sunday was no typical Sunday. There was more hustle and bustle than ordinary, more sparkle to the store windows than ordinary, and the number of heartfelt smiles on the faces of shoppers young and old was *extraordinary*. It was a destination that provided all the joy these two could ask for and more to set the mood on the first date of their lives.

They met in front of the megaplex that afternoon and watched the animated movie that Kotobuki had been dying to see. It was a coming-of-age film about a high school concert band club. Kai had actually been meaning to watch it too, but he'd been so caught up with work, midterms, and life in general since its premiere in late April that he just never found the time.

The movie far exceeded his expectations and its hundred-minute runtime passed by in an instant. Even after the screen went dark, the two still sat in their seats to bask in the raw emotion. They eventually moved to the food court, where they excitedly shared their thoughts.

"Every one of the new first years proved to be quite the headache, did they not?"

"Indeed they did, Nakamura. But their personalities were so unique that I couldn't help but smile at their antics."

"It seems a tad rude in light of Kumiko's dejection, but I did indeed smile at them as well."

“It was no different from the televised version in this regard, but the way it layered and intertwined otherwise ordinary relationships to create something so riveting reminded me of how outstanding a work it truly is.”

“Incidentally, Kotobuki, which of the new first years was your favorite?”

“I must say Kanade. Characters with good looks and bad attitudes are the best.”

“I understand. Characters with good looks and bad attitudes truly are the best.”

“But Nakamura, knowing your tastes, I would have inferred that the tall girl would have been your favorite.”

“I had high hopes for her, but she mellowed out rather quickly. If I may be so bold, I would say she was too lacking in venom.”

“But her final line was so powerful. I believe you’d do well to rewatch it with more innocent eyes.”

“So says Kotobuki, the owner of a pair of eyes that have warped far beyond the pale?”

“Let us change the subject. Speaking of venom, I have the faintest of feelings that Reina softened up a bit.”

“I’d prefer to say she grew up. Particularly during that festival scene, the profile of her face was of superb beauty.”

“Indeed. Even as a woman, I found myself head over heels.”

“Curious you mention that, as I personally feel her relationship with Kumiko could have been a bit more, hmm... Incidentally, while Kumiko might have been the darling of many an eye, did you notice that Asuka was wearing matching rings with Kaori?”

“Wha... I... Hm... I failed to notice. Wait... Wait...”

“In other words, that could only mean one thing...”

“I suggest you refrain from spoilers, Nakamura. Not even you would be spared from my wrath.”

“Strange, I could have sworn we had both just watched the film mere moments ago...”

Their conversation blossomed into an exchange of impressions. Kai considered himself a fan, but Kotobuki was an anime otaku among anime otaku. Each topic would lead to another, as her praise of the fantastic animation was followed by a discussion of the complex web of human conditions and then returned to the positively exquisite animation. She went back and forth between topics to cover the extent of her thoughts. Such passion made them thirsty, however, requiring that they stop for drinks twice on the way.

It turned out that one hundred minutes wasn't nearly enough time to fully discuss an anime of the same length, but there was too much on today's schedule to spend it all on anime talk. An alarm Kotobuki had set on her smartphone rang at 4 p.m. to remind them of that.

“Let us go look at clothes, Nakamura.”

“Oh? Is it that time already?”

“The reservation for our Italian dinner is at six, so I'm afraid we might not make it unless we begin shopping now.”

“A-Ah, right, of course,” said Kai, barely gulping back his bewildered question of how long it could possibly take to pick out some clothes.

“Please, Nakamura, don't act so apprehensive.” Sadly, she saw right through him. Kotobuki's emotional instability caused her to live by constantly assessing the moods of those around her. She didn't let that insecurity show in her attitude, of course, instead choosing to explain her views with an air of superiority.

“I understand that you have no interest in what women shop for, particularly as it pertains to fashion. However, I'd like to choose clothes that suit your tastes. I would then wear said clothes on our next date. In this sense, you are the sole benefactor of this trip. Surely you could show some cheer, no?”

“I-I have no confidence in my tastes.”

“All the more reason to try. Why not consider the possibility that it might be

fun as part of what this date is intended to test?”

“I-I see. One will never know if one never tries.”

The two tossed their emptied cups in the garbage and left the food court behind. This mall had dozens of apparel shops that Kotobuki could choose from...not that Kai was familiar with any of them.

“Kotobuki, do you have a particular store in mind?”

“I’d like to start by visiting a store nearby.”

“...You don’t intend to visit each store in order, do you?”

“Oh no, I’ve no plans to do that.”

“Phew.”

“We don’t have nearly enough time to visit every single one.”

“So...you wish to visit as many as is feasible.”

Kotobuki chuckled as she walked toward a women’s clothing store. Kai did his best not to hang his head as he followed.

Kotobuki was small in stature, even for a high school girl, but Kai instinctively walked at her pace; he wouldn’t commit the rookie mistake of using the longer strides of a boy to walk ahead of her. He’d had this common courtesy drilled into him by a certain someone over the past year. In meeting her pace, he noticed something: the girl walking next to him fidgeted conspicuously with every step. And every now and then, she stole a glance at Kai’s empty hand.

She probably wants to hold hands, Kai’s intuition told him. However, he hesitated to casually do so. We’re not actually boyfriend and girlfriend, after all. Or is holding hands not that big a deal? It’s not like we’re kissing. Does it count as something to test on a date?

Was it okay? Or was it not? Kai went back and forth in his mind, but he eventually came to an answer.

Nah, let’s not. What if they held hands and they just so happened to run into an acquaintance? Kai put his active otaku imagination to work visualizing the possibilities. First of all, it wasn’t out of the question; T-City was the hottest

spot in town, so there were sure to be many students from Kai and Kotobuki's schools—Asagi High and Ginga High, respectively—loitering about. If they were just walking together, they could explain their plans away as a mere hangout. But if they were spotted holding hands, they might be mistaken for lovers, and that kind of misunderstanding would be harder to correct.

I mean, not that it'd mean much to me if someone found us...

He'd surely be the butt of a few jokes, but that would be the end of it. Given that he was with a girl as cute as Kotobuki, the biggest fuss they could make would probably amount to calling him a playboy. But Kotobuki was a girl, which put her in a far more delicate situation. If rumors started going around at school that she had a boyfriend—even if they were true—then it could make her life difficult. In other words, it was the man's responsibility to be considerate here.

Yeah, I just can't see it being worth the risk, thought Kai. It pained him to hurt her feelings, but he did his best to pretend he didn't see a thing. Kotobuki might glance and fidget, but she wouldn't take action. She wouldn't be the one to grab his hand first.

I'm really sorry.

He couldn't help but find that timid aspect of her adorable.

They arrived at the women's clothing section of the mall. It was called "Queen Street," a name that felt both gaudy and cheap. Women's clothing stores were crammed together on both sides of a walkway that continued as far as the eye could see. Kotobuki followed the advertisements and made a beeline for a nearby teen specialty store as Kai tagged along, unable to hide his discomfort. The shelves inside were lined with folded blouses on display.

"This one seems like it's made from excellent material," murmured Kotobuki as her gaze landed upon one. She then extended her hand to feel it and confirm her assumption.

"I understand considering colors and designs," said Kai, somewhat surprised, "but is it typical to focus on the quality of the cloth?"

"Do you typically not?"

“I...typically don’t consider it as a factor.”

“Then how do you typically choose your clothing, Nakamura?”

“...Everything I wear is a hand-me-down from my relatives.”

“Just the answer I was expecting.”

“May I ask that you refrain from such condescending judgments?”

“But are you not the type that prefers to buy games when you can afford clothes? Do you not prefer to spend time playing rather than shopping?”

“Why, I believe that summarizes my beliefs to the letter.”

“Of course, I like that down-to-earth part of you as well.”

“I thank you for bestowing upon me such praise from on high.”

Kai had to chuckle at their banter, particularly due to how Kotobuki grew more and more flushed once the word “like” left her mouth.

C’mon, don’t blush at your own lines, he thought.

Kotobuki tried to play off her shame by returning her focus to the blouse she was inspecting, but she lost all interest as soon as she came upon the price tag. The high-quality fabrics must have commanded too high a cost.

“It seems you have a far more discerning eye for clothing than I, Kotobuki.”

“I am the daughter of a dressmaker, after all,” bragged Kotobuki now that her humiliation was behind her. It was the first time Kai had heard of her family situation. “My mother is quite skilled at making clothing from scratch. So much so that she made her hobby into a career by opening a shop to do it.”

It was apparently a small shop, but it still provided custom-tailored, one-of-a-kind pieces at reasonable prices. It had many local customers who’d given it a great deal of patronage over the years.

I see, thought Kai joyfully as he looked at Kotobuki’s raised chin. *She must be proud of her mom.*

He suddenly had an idea.

“In that case, is there any need to go out to buy clothes in the first place?”

“Do you not think that commissioning my mother for my ideal piece of clothing is a far different proposition from exploring the many choices that already exist? I could be inspired by something new that I’ve never seen before.”

“A fair point. I’m still but a novice in this field.”

“Well, my mother is none too pleased when I tell her I’d like to go out shopping for clothes.”

“That’s rather cute of her.”

“I’m proud of my mother for a reason,” said Kotobuki with her head held high.

They eventually reached the dress displays as they chatted. Kotobuki picked two out and tried draping them over herself one after the other.

“Which do you think looks best, Nakamura?” asked Kotobuki as she showed both to Kai. It was a choice between a solid bluish one and a solid whitish one.

“They...both look splendid on you. I think.” Kai stumbled in his answer, but he put his gut reaction into words.

“Then what about these two?” The choice was now between a solid greenish dress and a solid brownish one.

“I...find it difficult to choose a victor.”

“Then how about these?” This time, the choice was between a different bluish dress and another whitish one.

“I...think either way is fine.”

“You’re fine either way, you’re saying.”

“That may have carried a slightly negative nuance, but rest assured I meant no such thing.” Kai’s excuses made Kotobuki’s shoulders slump, lowering the dresses along with them.

“Please put some thought into your words, Nakamura.”

“I’m afraid I have my limits. Your face is flawless, so perhaps it’s just that anything would look wonderful on you.”

Kotobuki’s beauty was almost criminal, with her looks deserving of just about

every word of praise in the dictionary. She could probably rock any outfit that didn't look like it belonged in a carnival.

"I-Is that so. Well, I appreciate your unhelpful advice." Kotobuki hid her face once again. She may have aired out her contempt, but she was certainly feeling bashful from that compliment. And so, she hurried to the next destination as though trying to escape from his gaze.

She hustled right past the neighboring store. As well as the next.

"Kotobuki, where might we be headed?" asked Kai from behind, but it appeared that Kotobuki did not intend to stop until the embarrassed flush faded from her face.

Her brisk pace continued as they walked right past ten entire shops, quite an impressive feat of emotional insecurity. Now that she'd presumably settled down, Kotobuki strolled into another nearby store. She made a beeline for the shelves that were lined with tops and unfurled one before Kai.

"Nakamura, it has come to my attention that you lack the necessary eye for fashion to judge whether an article of clothing would suit me or not. As such, can you instead give me your honest opinion on the design of this top?"

"I offer you my sincerest gratitude for putting the past behind you and asking with all the patience of a teacher."

"Oh, you flatter me," said Kotobuki as she held her chin up with pride once more, but this was an act.

"I didn't exactly intend to flatter." The blank stare on Kai's face was part of the act as well. He was fully aware that Kotobuki's response was an extension of the blush-hiding that led to their recent power-walking session.

Still, he took a look at the item handed to him and began analyzing its design. It was a one-shoulder rayon top. The glossy stoplight-red color scheme made it very eye-catching and gave it a mature feel despite being meant for a younger crowd. Sadly, the deepest impression Kai could feel toward it was simply:

"It's pretty red."

"...Then how about this?" asked Kotobuki as she unfolded another item from

the shelf. This one was a linen peplum top; despite its somewhat tasteless design, the tangerine color scheme gave it the unbalanced cuteness of a mascot character.

“It’s pretty yellow.”

“...What about this?” Her next selection was a cache-cœur wrap blouse with an undeniably adult design. However, the left and right sides that tied together at the front were split, creating a two-tone color scheme with one side being mauve and the other beige. It straddled the line between high fashion and a faux-pas, between cutting edge and bleeding edge. In short, only a select few could pull the look off.

“It’s neat how it’s got the two colors.”

“...”

Kotobuki heaved a deep, exaggerated sigh...followed by several more.

“I was a fool to seek your counsel for fashion.”

“May I ask that you not insult me by pretending to reprimand yourself?”

Kai grimaced as Kotobuki folded up the three items and returned them neatly to their shelves.

“I believe you can leave the clothes out unfolded. An employee is sure to fold them up for you.”

“As the daughter of a dressmaker, it’d sicken me to leave them in a mess.”

“Ah, so it’s a force of habit.”

Though to Kai’s eyes, Kotobuki folded the shirts with such a professional technique that it seemed like far more than a mere habit. She returned the three blouses to their shelves so neatly that they looked like they’d never been touched to begin with. It...was kinda cool.

“That said, I’m by no means a successor to her craft.”

“Believe me, I can understand. For instance, I can’t help but fix messy shelves of manga and light novels when I see them in bookstores.”

“Even when you don’t work there?”

“Right. Because I’m an otaku.”

“Ah, so that is a force of habit as well,” chuckled Kotobuki. Then her face soon lit up with an idea.

“Well, Nakamura, now that I’m aware of how difficult it will be to discuss fashion with you, I think I’ll ask my questions from a different angle.”

“...Dare I ask what that may be?”

“Between Hestia and Ais, which *DanMachi* character would you like to see me cosplay?”

“The goddess, if you’d please!”

“What about the Priestess or the Sword Maiden from *Goblin Slayer*?”

“The Sword Maiden, if you’d please!”

“The Aggressive Archangel or Machi the Tormentor from *Ryuo*?”

“Kugui, if you’d please!”

“Thank you for showing such a contrast from your previous behavior with such knee-jerk responses.”

“You’re very welcome!”

Kotobuki’s shoulders slumped in exasperation at the otaku’s simple-mindedness, but Kai paid no mind as he gave her a goofy grin and a thumbs up. After all, he knew Kotobuki was an anime otaku too; who else could ask questions like those at the drop of a hat? He didn’t need to walk on eggshells the way he would around a non-otaku.

“Either way, I now see which way your clothing preferences lean.”

“Oh, is that so? Truly an expert you are to discern what I wasn’t even aware of myself! What, pray tell, might these preferences be?”

“All of the characters you wished to see have huge tits.”

“...”

“Do you truly wish to see *me* in those cosplays?”

“...Would that present a problem?”

“My sincerest apologies,” pouted Kotobuki, “but I won’t be able to live up to your hopes. Mine are on the subtler side.” She stared daggers at Kai as though to complain about how far those characters were from her image.

“I-I thought you still wished for me to be honest about what clothing designs I liked, not whether they’d suit you...”

“Except we have long since changed the subject.”

“Well, it’s not as though you’d visit events or sell photo sets, so it doesn’t matter if they suit you! You have as much of a right to the blue ribbon as anyone! Heck, no otaku could resist the allure of having their favorite character cosplayed for them!”

Kai blurted his defense out in haste. Not that there was any chance that these cosplays would happen, or that his answers meant anything beyond his own personal preferences. That made Kotobuki burst out laughing.

“Yes, well, I understand. I’m an otaku too, after all.”

Kotobuki placed her fingertips to her mouth as she chuckled with glee. Even Kai had to smile at how he fell for the bait hook, line, and sinker.

“Incidentally,” continued Kotobuki with a teasing look, “I’ve one more thing to confirm with you, Nakamura.”

“Wh-Whatever could it be?”

“The Sword Maiden is a blindfolded character. Does that mean you wish to blindfold me?”

“...No otaku could resist the allure of having their favorite character cosplayed for them.”

“Quite the pervert you are.”

“...I’d prefer you call it an otaku’s force of habit.”

“It seems I ought to be careful around you,” said Kotobuki with a giggle. She pretended to hop away and keep her distance.

“Heh, you little...”

“Tee hee!”

If they were at a beach, this might be the part where Kotobuki would shout “Catch me if you can!” as they playfully chased each other around. However, this was a store in a mall, so they refrained from making a scene around their fellow shoppers. Still, Kotobuki put on her mischievous expression once more.

“It may be quite the departure from our initial plans...but Nakamura, if you so wish, I might be willing to cosplay for you.”

“Oh my. Right here? Right now?”

“Yes, by mixing and matching the clothes here. By no means would it be a serious attempt.”

“F-For example?”

“Yes, as an example... I suppose the Sword Maiden would be off the table, but how about the Guild Girl? I saw the perfect waistcoat for it earlier. All that’s left is to select the dress shirt, ribbon, and trumpet skirt. If I put my hair in a braid, I should get rather close.”

“Please oh please, I will beg on my hands and knees if I must.”

“It might be a difficult outfit to wear on our next date.”

“I will bear the shame with you.”

“Your resolve is an inspiration to otaku everywhere, Nakamura.”

“It could work as an Akiba date! It totally could!”

“You needn’t sound so desperate...”

They continued conversing until they had backtracked by nearly ten stores. Kotobuki picked out the waistcoat she had mentioned, and indeed, it looked quite similar to the one the Guild Girl wore over her white dress shirt. But to Kai...

“I was wondering what a ‘waistcoat’ could possibly have referred to, but it appears it isn’t worn on one’s waist.”

“If that wasn’t intended as a joke to have me rolling on the floor, then you might find it wise to avoid running your mouth.”

“...I apologize for my ignorance of fashion.”

But hey, thought Kai, it's not just otaku! All men are like this! They are...right? Right?!

"I think this shall do." Kotobuki quickly assembled her outfit and headed toward the fitting room.

"Er...pardon me for exposing my ignorance once again, but may I ask something?"

"Whatever might it be? Given how close we are, you needn't be shy."

"Is there anywhere in particular I should go while you're changing clothes?"

Being a lone man in the women's clothing section put Kai ill at ease. He worried that some of the employees might shoot him suspicious looks.

"Worry not. Employees at stores like these are experienced in these matters, so I'm sure they've already noticed that we entered together. Besides, nothing about you warrants suspicion."

"Perhaps...I'm overthinking it?"

"You are indeed. But if you're so worried, why not wait before my changing room? That would make it clear that you didn't come alone."

"It would put my mind at ease...but would I not hear you changing?"

"H-How closely do you intend to listen?!" exclaimed Kotobuki, holding her clothes close in shock.

"Would I normally not be able to hear those sounds?"

"Normally, you would not."

"Well, that's another worry off my chest."

"...Nakamura, I am now painfully aware that you've never shopped for clothes with someone in your entire life."

"Indeed. You're the first one I've shopped with, Kotobuki. Perhaps you could consider it an honor?"

"Should I ask why you seem so proud of this?" Kotobuki seemed exhausted by Kai's joke.

“Incidentally, Kotobuki, who do you typically shop for clothes with?”

“...My mother.”

“Not your friends?”

“Did you just chuckle to yourself? Do you mean to imply that I have no friends?”

“Heaven forbid. I know you’re better than that.”

“Well, I do. Not many, but even I have friends.”

“But of course! I didn’t intend to tease, so you needn’t get riled up. I merely found it amusing that despite your condescension towards me, you’re a high school student who still shops with her mother.”

“I believe that qualifies as ‘teasing.’ Not that someone who dresses in hand-me-downs has any right to speak.”

The two shot back at each other until the moment Kotobuki stepped into the changing stall and pulled the curtain shut. Of course, it couldn’t have been further from a real fight; talking trash with this dubiously devilish newbie had simply become a daily routine, a way of goofing off. Finally, Kotobuki poked her head out from the curtain to have the last word.

“I look forward to hearing you bow down and apologize for your insolence once you see me transform into the Guild Girl.”

“Oh, you.”

Kai gave the forehead on that smug face of hers a light flick as he laughed. Kotobuki grinned ear to ear as she pulled her head back behind the curtain.

Kai didn’t wait long in front of the fitting room before an unanticipated dilemma befell him. As Kotobuki said, he couldn’t hear any sensual shifting of clothing. But even though he was separated from her undressing by a curtain, he was extremely aware that he was separated from her undressing...by *only* a curtain.

Kotobuki, you liar, he thought. Well, technically she didn’t lie...

Needless to say, it was uncomfortable. With her presence on his mind, he

couldn't help but imagine what was going on. Whether he wanted it to or not, his mind's eye envisioned Kotobuki stripping off each layer of clothing, one by one, in crystal clarity.

You should've known better than to let a teenage boy's imagination run wild, he screamed internally. It was a vain attempt to distract himself from the unease that was making his cheeks redden. *I dunno how I can even look at Kotobuki after she gets out...*

He needed to cool his head, so he subtly snuck away from the fitting room area. But that meant killing time around a women's clothing department; a lone man in a desert of clothes, clothes, and more clothes he wouldn't buy nor care about. He felt forsaken by the powers above. And since he obviously had nothing to do, he found himself worrying about other people watching.

I know Kotobuki said I was overthinking it, but...

Sure, maybe the employees wouldn't find Kai suspicious. But would the other women shopping be so charitable? Wouldn't they say,

"Oh dear, this hideous insect has scuttered into our secret garden!"

"Gross!"

"I'm calling the police!"

Well, probably not, Kai figured. *Yeah, I'm just being too self-conscious. But having this stuff in the back of my mind still makes me uncomfortable...*

Maybe he could duck for cover in one of the rest stops a short distance away? After sending Kotobuki a message on LINE to let her know, of course.

Nah, she's doing this all for me, so I shouldn't be so insensitive.

This wasn't just some hang out with a friend. This was technically a date. So, with nothing else to do, Kai sauntered aimlessly around the women's clothing section while doing his best to avoid the field of vision of any of the female patrons. Of course, he took care not to stray too far from Kotobuki's fitting room.

This would probably happen a lot more often if Kotobuki and I were dating, thought Kai. *And they'd be tougher to avoid too.*

He ran through a potential situation in his head:

“Nakamura, I wish to go shopping for clothes. Could I trouble you to come along?”

“Yeah, uh, I don’t really care. How ’bout you go alone?”

“Oh...I see. It saddens me to hear, but if you say so...I shall.”

Wow, that Nakamura dude’s a real piece of work.

Wait wait wait, no, stop. That’s a bad habit of mine.

Kai frantically snapped himself out of it once he realized he was about to send himself into a depression spiral. He needed to follow the advice that his friend of just a few days gave him: when in Rome, do as the Romans do. This was a date, so he should be optimistic and try to enjoy it as much as he could. *Exactly, that’s part of what this trial period is for.*

Kai became determined. He would push himself to obtain an interest in fashion. As his first step on this journey, he walked to the **toddler’s clothing department** and **stared intently** at a pink blazer on display, thinking about how similar it looked to what Ai wore in volume 10 of *Ryuo*.

“Oh Kai, it *is* you! What are you doing...um, here?”

The voice that Kai found himself suddenly flanked by was one he had heard almost every day.

“Wha, Jun?!”

Kai swiveled around in surprise to face his equally surprised best friend.

Jun Miyakawa, the student hailed as the most beautiful girl in school, coincidentally had a passion for fashion. Her current outfit started with an off the shoulder top that was too bold to be worn by anyone with less than absolute confidence in their looks. The upward-facing frills along the top edge of her blouse came off as a cute wrapping for her impressive bust. Below it was

a miniskirt paired with thigh-high socks; Jun, ever the sucker for the “Absolute Territory” of 2D character costumes, had coordinated an outfit that brought this design to life. Even someone as uninterested in fashion as Kai had to admit that she looked pretty darn nice.

Anyway, Miyakawa was the fashionista here, so the hottest spot for women’s clothing in the prefecture was like her home turf. Kai, however, was undeniably on the away team, so Jun didn’t expect to run into him here either. She was probably still mentally sorting through her surprise.

“I...had no idea...” began Jun with a quivering voice as she covered her mouth. “You’re...into children’s clothes?”

“I’m not!” argued Kai, desperate to defend himself. “Don’t make me sound like some irredeemable degenerate!”

“But then...why were you staring at them so gooly-eyed?”

“I was just thinking that these clothes looked like what Ai was wearing.”

“But...you know that Ai only exists in the world of *The Ryuo’s Work is Never Done*, right? Not in reality, right?”

“I’m well aware! I know what fiction is!”

“Oh, phew. Don’t scare me like that, it’s bad for my heart.”

“The fact that you’d doubt me on this hurts my own heart more...”

Jun placed a hand to her chest and heaved a sigh of relief, at which Kai had to squint and glare. She continued nonchalantly.

“In that case, what’re you doing here?”

“I’m hanging out with a friend from work.”

“A girl?”

“Yeah. She’s a year younger too.”

“Ooooooh, Kai’s on a date with a younger woman. How *naughty*. Kai and his coworker, sittin’ in a tree...”

“Glad to see you’re taking it the way a ten-year-old would.”

Kai knew Jun was just joking around, so he played along. At least, until Jun pursed her perfect lips and took it a step further:

“Awww, I think I might be a lil’ jealous of your widdle coworker...”

“Uhhhhhhhhh,” said Kai, unsure of how to respond to this one. He’d known Jun for a while. He knew her tones. And this was her “honest feelings veiled by a joke” tone.

Jun may have been a girl, but she was still just a friend. Sure, there was nobody else Kai was closer to. Sure, she came over to his house five days a week, sometimes until the evening, and sometimes even stayed late enough to join his family for dinner. Sure, they had the exact same hobbies and thought on the same wavelength. Jun was an irreplaceable presence in his life. And yes, this caused the people around them to mistake them for lovers quite often, leading to all sorts of trouble—especially with Jun’s brother, Royalteach, who was pretty hard to win over.

But she was *not* his girlfriend. And he was fine with that. Honestly, he felt that it was better this way. He even gave a big speech about it. But...

Jun says she’s jealous of Kotobuki...but why?! Why?! Th-Th-There’s no way she l-l-likes me, r-r-right?! Did she want the two of us to go on a date?! But maybe she couldn’t come forward about her hidden feelings because I shouted about how much better it is to be friends?!

Kai’s brain was overwhelmed with surprise and panic. Of course, he couldn’t outwardly react to Jun’s jab; he just froze and anxiously waited for her to follow up.

“You turned me down all those times when I asked you to come shopping with me,” Jun eventually continued. “But this coworker gets the okay, huh? I see how it is.”

“Wait, *that’s* what you’re jealous of?!” Kai felt like he was about to collapse.

“What’re you getting mad at me for? You went sandal shopping with me *once* and then looked like you’d rather die than set foot in a mall ever again! And

when I offered to pick out shoes for you, you just said you didn't need 'em and cut me off!"

"Okay, okay, my bad," apologized Kai while he secretly breathed a sigh of relief. Thankfully, he was just jumping to conclusions and it was all just a misunderstanding. If Jun suddenly came to him asking to be lovers, that'd be the end of their current relationship.

"I mean, we go shopping together all the time, right?"

"Yeah, shopping for manga or games or merch, but not anything else. I mean, that's fun too, but still."

"And isn't fun what friendship is all about?"

It was because they were friends that Kai didn't want to lose it. He felt like a weight was lifted from his shoulders now that he knew he was just overthinking it. But at that very moment...

"...Nakamura? Whoever...might this person be?"

A voice suddenly called to him from behind. Its halted rhythm wasn't quite a sign of suspicion toward the newly appeared Jun; it bore the nervousness of a shy person meeting someone for the first time.

"Kotobuki?!" Kai swung around in a hurry and silently cursed her timing. He found himself face-to-face with the Guild Girl, as portrayed by Kotobuki.

"Um...yes."

Kai found himself holding his breath and clenching his fists as he forgot himself and basked in her glory. Of course, it was by no means a serious cosplay. It was just a knockoff version made by gathering a few vaguely reminiscent garments from around the store. If you analyzed every detail, you'd find no shortage of differences between her and the real thing. Her long hair was knotted into a thick braid that hung over her right shoulder; Kai could almost give her a round of applause to commend how quickly she was able to style it and how close it looked to the character's, but her hair was still the wrong color. And of course, the Guild Girl didn't have black eyes, either. A real

cosplayer would probably pick a fight with her over this offense to their craft.

But lacking polish or not, Kai was moved. Enthralled, even. His half-hearted assumption that seeing this cosplay would be “nice” was blown away by the reality standing before him. It didn’t matter how fake the cosplay was, his feelings were true!

Whoa, thought Kai. Kotobuki, you're amazing!

Kai was so overcome with emotion that he wanted to run up and praise her. But he couldn't...because someone else beat him to the punch.

“Omigosh! Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!”

Jun's squeals echoed across the department. Before Kai knew it, she had charged right at Kotobuki and given her a big hug without sparing a moment to ask for permission.

"What is this? Who is this?! She's so cute cute cute cute
cutecutecutecutecutekyutkyutkyutkyutkytkytkyooooooooot!"

She rapidly rubbed her cheeks against the top of Kotobuki's head. Kai could see how she rose to the rank of most popular girl in their grade. Jun was capable of befriending every girl in her class within seconds; she didn't hold the physical affection back, even with total strangers.

On the flip side, Kotobuki was a wallflower to the bone and a chicken at heart. Her brain probably couldn't process this bombastic and brazen bear hug. Her entire body was frozen up.

"She has a name," said Kai as he walked over to them. "It's Kotobuki Hotei."

“Kai, I had no clue you were hiding such a cutie from me! I’m amazed!”

“I wasn’t hiding anyone. This is that coworker I was just telling you about. Now that your question’s answered, give her some space. The poor girl’s got dead fish eyes.”

Kai felt bad for Kotobuki; the light had vanished from her pupils while the other half of her face was buried in Jun's giant boobs. He stepped in to help, but Jun only held her closer.



“Nuh-uh, no way! It’s Mareitaso! She’s real and she’s coming home with me!”

“I mean, I’m pretty sure the voice actress is a real person? Not that I’ve ever met her. And don’t call a character by their performer’s name, you’re supposed to call her the Guild Girl.”

“I’m sorry, you’re right! I’m showing a lack of respect to the source material and author! I owe Kumo an apology on my hands and knees!”

“I mean, I’ve never met Kumo either, I’m not sure you have to go that far...”

Jun was so excited that her conversational abilities were losing touch with reality, so Kai just had to chuckle and match her wavelength. This gave Kotobuki just enough time to recover and ask, “E-Excuse me, but could you perhaps let me go?”

She pleaded for mercy, though her voice was still faint. Jun acquiesced and loosened her grip; it seemed like she couldn’t turn down a request from the Guild Girl. That said, she clearly had no intention of letting go completely. Judging from Kotobuki’s sulking and sighing, she seemed to give up too.

“So, may I ask who this person who seems to lack any notion of restraint or respect might be?”

“I’m Jun Miyakawa! But you can call me Jun! Also, no need to be so polite!”

“Understood, Miyakawa.”

“D’awww, she’s emotionally distancing herself, what a sweetheart! I’m gonna die from cuteness!!!”

Kai failed to understand what part of this hit Jun’s tastes.

“Perhaps you could provide an answer, Nakamura?”

“I could. You recall the person I’ve talked to you about and even received your counsel regarding, no? This final boss of face-nuzzling that’s befallen you is the best friend of mine in question.”

“Huh?! Wha?????” This was apparently such a shock to Kotobuki that her empty eyes finally regained their vigor.

“Did that really warrant such a flabbergasted response?”

“This is *really* the very person you claim visits you five times a week? The one who always misfires upon your position when you play *Tanks* and costs you roughly ten Lifepowders per quest in *Monster Hunter*?”

“I think your memory may be a tad selective, but yes, this is her.”

“Oh, *I* see. So, that’s how you talk about me to other people, huh, Kai?”

“I *just* said Kotobuki had a selective memory!” argued Kai, desperate to defend himself against Jun’s critical glare. Well, he couldn’t blame her for giving him the stink eye...but why was Kotobuki staring daggers at him too?

“I had heard this friend of yours was a girl,” said Kotobuki in an astonished yet somehow accusatory tone, “but I never expected it would be one so pretty...”

“If I may gloss over your many inconsiderate wordings, what kind of girl did you expect her to be?”

“I was certain she had to look like a gender-swapped version of you...”

“Please don’t use your imagination to craft such monstrosities.”

Kai was none too pleased to hear about this assumption, but Jun just giggled about how she could totally see it. Kai wondered if she understood that Kotobuki was talking about her.

“Anyway,” suggested Jun, “now that we’re all buddies, how about we hit up the mall together?” She gave a carefree laugh as though she’d come up with the best idea in the world. But the eyes buried in the cleavage of her bosom once again lost their luster as a voice rose up that said, “Since when did we become buddies?”

“No, wait,” said Kai, scrambling to defuse the situation. “Don’t go there, Jun!”

“Huh? Why not? I wanna play with the Guild Girl too. You can’t hog her forever, Kai.”

“No, I mean, that’s not the issue here!”

It wasn’t just because the two had reservations at the Italian restaurant. *I might be late to realize it, but you can’t go on a date and then get all friendly with another woman, right?! Just because Jun’s my best friend in the world doesn’t mean Kotobuki’s gonna warm up to her!*

Kai was so used to spending every day with Jun that he took the situation for granted. Truly a mistake he should strive to never repeat. *I'll apologize to Kotobuki later. Hopefully she'll cut me some slack...*

If one were to draw a Venn diagram of the years that Kai had been alive and the years he spent without a girlfriend, it would form a perfect circle. This whole dating thing was like a strange new world to him. He wasn't used to this and couldn't handle it with much tact, but he would at least be sorry.

That would come later, though. His first order of business was to tear Kotobuki from the clutches of this final boss of face-nuzzling.

"Hey, Jun, can I be honest for a sec?" Kai was about to tell her that they were kind of on a date, but just before he could get the words out...

"Jun, could you perhaps put two and two together already?"

A voice suddenly came from behind him. It was another voice he'd heard before; one that was refined, elegant, and yet as cold as ice.

Welp, thought Kai. There ya go! Jun's a super-popular friend-haver, of course she ain't shopping alone! I had a feeling this was gonna happen...

A shiver ran down Kai's spine as he turned around. There, he faced a cold-blooded woman who exuded the prestige of a yakuza's woman far beyond her years. And her name was Reina Fujisawa, the beautiful queen commanding the throne at the top of the school food chain. Her beauty was no exaggeration; she was actually signed to a talent agency in the hopes of becoming a full-time model. She apparently had been best friends with Jun since before they entered high school. As for Kai? He had only entered the ranks of diplomatic relations with her just the other day under their curious commonality of "being friends with Jun."

The ice queen greeted them all with her trademark flawlessly faked smile. Jun may have been sulking, but Reina dragged her off regardless.

"My apologies. I'll get this bother out of your hair, so don't hold it against

her.”

Reina smoothed things over with Kotobuki while she continued to project a smile that was too pretty and too practiced to be natural. As someone who didn't know what that smile hid, Kotobuki probably saw Reina as nothing more than the kind of mature beauty that could take her breath away.

“O-Oh, no, worry not. I hardly noticed her presence.”

Kai also tried to extend his thanks, but it took everything he had to squeak out a faint and shriveled, “Thanks, I owe ya.”

Reina kept her fake smile until the end before saying curtly, “Tomorrow. At school.”

She wanted to talk.

Another shiver ran down Kai's spine.

Episode 002: The Ice Queen in the Next Row Spoils My Reputation Rotten

The next day on the way to school, Kai messaged Jun on LINE so they could meet up and take the same car on the same train. It was rush hour and the passengers were packed like sardines. And so began their daily four-stop, twelve-minute endurance test to reach Sakata, the closest station to Asagi High School. As usual, Kai let Jun stand by the window at the entrance. He supported himself with an arm against the door, which he used to create a wall to protect his friend from the squeeze of the cramped car.

Incidentally, while Jun did agree to meet up with Kai that morning, she started getting pouty the moment their eyes met. Kai figured she was still holding a grudge over not being able to hang out with him and Kotobuki. She even snidely asked if he “had any fun last night.”

“Like hell. We ate dinner and split up at eight. Our day was completely wholesome.” Frankly, it was a good deal more wholesome than the many days Jun spent eating dinner at Kai’s house and staying over past nine.

“Kai, you wuss.”

“Could you at *least* call me a gentleman?!”

“How about you come clean with me first?”

“Well...to be honest, I’m not sure if I like her as a woman or not yet.”

“Yeah, figures. You can’t know that stuff unless you try going on a date first.”

She really told him the same thing Kotobuki did...

“Anyway,” he continued, “I figured dates were for people who already liked each other. I didn’t think they were such a casual thing.”

“Hah, that’s just in the world of manga.”

She really told him the same thing Kotobuki did!

“Okay, fine, sorry for being an otaku. My apologies for going this long without ever having this experience.”

“I mean, I’ve never gone on a date either.”

“You haven’t? And you’re still talking like an expert here?!”

“I get kinda grossed out when guys make it too obvious what they’re after.”

Ah, figures, thought Kai. *Guys probably feel a little pressured when asking out someone as popular as her.*

“And besides,” said Jun, “it’s way more fun to hang out with friends, isn’t it?”

“I feel this on a deep, spiritual level,” concurred Kai as he gave a large nod. Friends were, in fact, good. Even now, it was comforting to have someone he could casually spill his guts to.

“Anyway, that’s how it went. Hanging out with Kotobuki was fun, but we didn’t do anything even remotely inappropriate.”

“Kind of a waste with a girl that cute, if you ask me. Honestly, I wouldn’t mind going on a date with her myself.”

“Right, right, another one for the Miyakawa harem.” Jun got a kick out of Kai’s moping self-deprecation. “Actually Jun, that’s something I’ve been meaning to ask *you*.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re always saying you want to ‘smooch’ and ‘marry’ 2D girls, but do you feel that way about Kotobuki? Would you go for the real thing?”

“Well, 2D and 3D aren’t the same thing for me. I wouldn’t be serious if I said I wanted to marry a real girl.”

“Huh, is that so?” Kai nodded along, but he didn’t quite take that at face value. The state of mind that could make her so attached to Kotobuki was just a bit beyond his imagination. Sure, Kai had his moments too; he’d admired how hard-boiled and cool Makina Kaizu from *A Sister’s All You Need* before and he’d even swooned a little when Bell from *DanMachi* shot off all those Firebolts to save Lili. But he’s never wanted to *smooch* a male character. Not once. And if he found himself with a real-life male coworker, even one on the cuter side, he’d

never feel compelled to nuzzle his cheeks against him.

“Are you trying to say I’m weird?” accused Jun as she puffed out her cheeks.

“No, I’m just trying to understand,” said Kai in an attempt to calm her down.

“Well, I guess it’s not exactly universal. That’s why Reina tells me I’m weird right to my face. I don’t think it’s weird at all, though.”

“Do go on.”

“Look, girls just like cute things! It doesn’t matter how old we get. Mascot characters, stuffed animals, I love ’em all. And when it comes to girls, real or fictional, cuteness is justice!”

“I see, I’m starting to get it.”

“But it’s like how some people say high schoolers aren’t supposed to like stuffed animals since those are for kids, so you have other people who hide the fact that they really like that stuff because they don’t want to get made fun of.”

“Ah, totally! They’re everywhere! There are even guys who like stuffed animals and mascot characters but act tough and hide it.”

“Right? But I don’t hide it. I’d rather be open about everything! It’s love!”

“I see. So to you, Kotobuki falls into the same category as a stuffed animal?”

“It sounds a little rude when you put it like that, but yeah, to be honest, it’s a similar state of mind. Just don’t tell her I said that.” She sealed that final plea by adorably sticking out the slightest tip of her tongue. “But for real, if we’re talking about cuteness, I’ve never seen a girl that cute before! Can you blame me for falling head over heels and wanting to cuddle her?”

“I don’t think passion gets you out of this one...”

“It’s love!”

“Anyway, are you *sure* you’ve never seen a girl that cute? Aren’t you surrounded by cute girls?”

“If we want to get technical, Reina’s group is more in the orbit of Planet Beauty. They’re not Cutelings. They don’t make my inner Kanroji start blushing.”

Jun could have said “struck a chord” or something, but she replaced her metaphor with a manga character. She was an otaku, if it wasn’t obvious.

“Not much you can do when Kanroji goes silent.” Kai understood her perfectly. He was an otaku, if that wasn’t obvious. “But yeah, now that you mention it, Reina’s group definitely fits that bill.”

“They all say I’m the biggest baby face in the group!”

“Ha ha, compared to them, you might be. Wait, what about Mihara? She’s definitely a Cuteling, right?”

Kai brought up his classmate, Momoko Mihara. She was more bratty-faced than baby-faced, but she undoubtedly held the class’s crown for cuteness. She also held the crowns for most annoying, most irritating, and most likely to get punched if she weren’t a woman.

“Oh, no way with Momoko!”

“Ah, so Mihara’s a no-go.” Kai reflected on just how perfectly their wavelengths matched.

“Even mascot characters live in a dog-eat-dog world these days. They can’t survive on looks alone. Personality’s just as important, I’ll have you know.”

“I feel that. Like how I can go for *Sumikkogurashi*.”

With that said...

“Okay Jun, I can understand why you’d want to cuddle Kotobuki. I don’t think you’re weird for it.”

“Kai, my man! How ’bout I cuddle you as a reward? Here comes the cuddle!”

“Cut it out, there are people watching!”

“Just a widdle cuddle?”

Not taking no for an answer, Jun nuzzled her cheeks against Kai’s chest. Kai wished that this could have happened after they switched to their summer uniforms instead of while he was in his thick blazer...though he didn’t tell her he thought that.

“Hey, I’m gonna head to the staff room,” said Jun the moment they arrived at

school.

“What, did a teacher call you for something? Are you in trouble?”

“Oh, *please*! Broyalty just forgot his lunch and I’ve gotta drop it off for him.”

“For real?” Kai was at a loss.

“Aww, you down about somethin’? Let me guess, did you perhaps want to walk to class with lil’ ol’ me?”

“Well, maybe I did! You’re really gonna tease me when you already know, huh?”

“Well, I’d be so embarrassed if my friends started any *rumors* over us coming to school together, so I’ll be off to the staff room now. Toodles!”

“Why you...”

Kai gave an unamused glare, but Jun just giggled and went on her way. With nothing else to do, he headed to Class 2-1 alone.

Yes, he had a reason for going through the effort of meeting up for their commute, but it wasn’t that Jun was begging to hear about Kotobuki (and if she were, that could wait until after school). No, he had a different, far more pressing concern.

I hope she hasn’t arrived yet, prayed Kai. *Heck, might as well hope she’s late.*

Kai fearfully entered the classroom doors and found his hopes were immediately dashed. The person he so desperately hoped would be tardy was instead staring him right in the eye. With her target now in sight, Reina Fujisawa welcomed Kai with a faked smile and invited him to “come over here, would you?”

Yep, she’s here, lamented Kai as he dragged himself over. If he didn’t go now, he’d pay for it dearly later. Jun could have given him some confidence if she were here, but that lifeline was already snapped. He was now resigned to his fate.

Reina was by the window near the front row, where she always spent her time between classes. She gracefully gossipped with two of the class’s particularly popular girls as they waited at her sides like lackeys. One of them

was a subject of that morning's conversation, Momoko Mihara.

"Mooornin', Ash!" said Momoko in a voice too sweet to mean anything but mischief. "My, you *sure* look peachy today!"

"You should get your eyes checked." Kai had a hard time taking that compliment seriously when he was shaking in his boots over the decidedly not-peachy look Reina's eyes were throwing his way.

"But your face looks kinda dead inside today, which is just the Ash I know!"

"Faces don't change based on your health."

"Ahhh, that's right! Say, how 'bout I show you a good clinic where you can get some plastic surgery done?"

"Is it too late for you to reincarnate into a less shitty person?"

See? Annoying, right?

The other lackey who was currently holding back her laughter at this exchange was Shirayuki Saitou.

"Hah, I never get enough of you jokesters," she said as she melodramatically held her gut. Maybe people were just like that when they had American moms. Shirayuki herself was the tallest girl in the class and an untamed beauty with blazing red hair.

"Don't lump me in with Mihara..."

"Gahah, never change, Ash."

Kai was now being treated like an endangered species. Maybe he was; Momoko's *looks* were a ten out of ten, so no matter how annoying she got, typical guys probably wouldn't do much more than blush or lose their nerve. Maybe the rarity was just seeing Momoko's reaction after someone returned the venom she spat in kind.

Sucks for you, but I, Kai Nakamura, have become immune to cute girls thanks to the help of Jun and Kotobuki! You'll need something more than skin-deep to catch me slipping!

Kai allowed himself the honor of a smug smile. Until...

“Good morning, Ashie boy.”

Reina dropped her greeting like a final boss and Kai froze, his confidence quickly giving way to cowardice.

“G-Good morning, Ms. Reina,” he responded, barely managing to say it back in a shaky voice.

The tension in the air suddenly thickened. Even Momoko and Shirayuki’s looks made it clear that playtime was over.

Reina’s scary enough as is, thought Kai nervously, and now I gotta have you two against me?!

“Ash, buddy,” said Shirayuki. “No hard feelings, but there ain’t nothin’ lamer than a dude who starts getting full of himself.”

Shirayuki was just about Kai’s height, so she laid an arm on his shoulder with no trouble. But rather than feeling the joy of having a cute girl right in his face, he felt the anxiety of a predator cutting off his escape route.

“I-I don’t think anything’s gone to my head, though?” Kai managed to string together a defense while being as white as a sheet, but Momoko made it clear what crime he was being charged with.

“It’s not ‘Ms. Reina’ to you, now *is* it? It’s Fujisawa, ain’t it? I bet you’ve got *no* idea how *magnanimous* I am to let you call me by my first name, do ya?”

Ah, so that’s the issue, thought Kai. He could accept that they’d be displeased by his disrespect of Her Majesty. But in that case, Kai truly was innocent. He was about to argue back, but Reina beat him to it.

“Worry not,” she assured them, clearly unbothered. “He’s not out of line. I asked him to call me ‘Reina.’”

It was true. There was actually a time when her opinion of him had hit rock bottom, where she looked him in the eye and said, “A man like you doesn’t deserve Jun. I refuse to accept you.”

But soon after that, Reina apologized and suggested they make amends. He didn’t quite understand why since he’d just got done getting his ass beaten by

Matsuda's gang of popular dudes, but it did happen. And when Reina suggested they actually be friends, she told Kai that he could address her by her first name.

Momoko and Shirayuki, who knew absolutely none of this, looked at Reina with their eyes bulging in disbelief. Was this such a big deal?

On second thought, maybe it is, figured Kai. Reina's group might have been a collection of normies, but it was well-known how guarded they were around boys. And Reina was the most untouchable of them all; the fake smile she gave others erected a wall that was both charming and chilling. Kai assumed she was joking when she said that using her first name was a privilege, but it seemed like there was more truth to that than he first believed.

"Incidentally, I don't believe the 'Ms.' part is necessary."

"Er, it just sounds more natural to me this way..."

Kai humbled himself before the venerable words of the queen. She was a yakuza's woman, after all. A super high school level partner in crime.

"Ashie boy, are you certain that something incredibly rude isn't running through your mind?"

"Absolutely positively not! Also, you can totally drop the 'boy' part any time you'd like!"

"Perhaps. Maybe when you grow into someone a bit more reliable, I'll consider you a man and do so. But for now, Ashie 'boy' feels more natural to me."

"How're you calling me rude when you're literally treating me like a kid?!"

Kai dropped all restraint in his outburst. After watching their comedy routine, Shirayuki and Momoko seemed to regret their prior presumptions.

"Dang, Ash, you really *are* buds with Reina. Hella my bad 'bout earlier, but you can call me 'Yuki' if it makes ya feel better!"

"And *I*, Momoko, am *totes* cool with 'Momoko'!"

"Look, *I'm* cool as long as you're not at my throat," said Kai. Of course, he

welcomed casual relationships, so he chose to take their suggestions as a net positive. “But if you *really* want me to feel better, you could try calling me ‘Kai’ instead of ‘Ash.’”

“Ya see, Ash, this here’s a term of endearment.”

“Endearment, dearie!”

Kai didn’t know about Yuki, but Momoko was definitely lying.

Oh well, I’ll take it, he thought. The tension had faded and everyone was on the same page. Maybe Reina was actually kind of nice and not someone to be terrified of? She even had a gentle smile on her face as she continued the conversation.

“Incidentally, Ashie boy, do you remember what I told you yesterday?”

“Oh yeah, you wanted to talk about something at school, right?”

Kai wondered what the subject could possibly be. *I could’ve sworn she was gonna grill me about going on that date with Kotobuki*, he thought.

But hey, the mood was so friendly, right? It couldn’t be. He was just jumping to conclusions, right? Kai waited for Reina to answer without a care in the world. Reina, still grinning from ear to ear, did so.

“Of course. I’d like to talk about how you ditched Jun to go on a date with that little homewrecker.”

Ah. Of course it was that. *Don’t sucker punch me like this! It’s bad for my heart!*

“Depending on your answer, you may have hell to pay.”

Kai’s previously carefree expression was now frozen that way. Meanwhile, Reina kept her icy smile as she gave him a condition that made his blood run cold. The tension thickened once again as even Shirayuki and Momoko glared at him in righteous anger over their friend.

“You should be thanking me, Ashie boy. I consider us friends, which is why I’m willing to lend an ear to your excuse.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Incidentally, will your excuse wrap up quickly, or will it take a while?”

“It...uh, will probably take a while.”

“Very well,” accepted Reina. Her model-in-training smile could make anyone swoon, but that sinister tone of hers could extinguish the flame of a centuries-long romance.

“After school. Behind the gym.”

“...Yes ma’am.”

A third shiver ran down Kai’s spine.



And so his day continued until the final school bell rang. Kai was called out behind the gym by Reina. Specifically, they were at the landing on the half-turn staircase by the entrance where Reina demanded he sit on his knees. The landing was made of solid concrete, which put a lot of pain on Kai’s shins.

“Why do I have to sit like this?”

“What better position for someone who needs to reflect on his mistakes?”

Reina answered immediately. Her position of choice was to stand firm with her arms crossed. Having this ice queen intimidate him from above already struck fear into his heart.

On the other hand, Kai wasn’t quite sure where to rest his eyes. Reina, as an exemplar of the modern high school girl, wore her skirts short. And when you factored in the long, slender legs of her supermodel body, her hips were pretty high off the ground. As such, if she were to stand in front of Kai while he were on his knees, he might see a glimpse of something inside her skirt that he absolutely should not see.

But I’ll probably get kicked if I point it out to her, so I’ll just keep quiet.

If something *happened* to enter his line of sight, it would be completely

unintentional. Good enough, right? Well, at least latching his mind onto this unexpected turn of events made him only half as terrified.

“What, exactly, are these mistakes that I need to reflect on?” Kai may have been forced to his knees, but he still showed a bit of resistance in his voice.

“The mistake of daring to two-time Jun when she’s a better lover than you could ever ask for.”

“Two-time, you say.”

“Ashie boy, might I ask for your excuse?”

“Sure, it’s the same thing I’ve been telling you this whooooooooooooooooole time. Jun and I aren’t boyfriend and girlfriend. We’re friends. I had a test date with Kotobuki. That’s not being unfaithful.”

“My, you’re a stubborn one. Do you really think such a thinly veiled lie will get you out of this?”

“I swear to you that it’s the truth.” Kai sighed at how they were once again talking past each other.

“Well, I’ll have you know that you should choose Jun. Forget about that other girl. Swear to me right here, right now, that you will never see her again.”

Reina commanded him with force. Kai slumped his shoulders. *Here we go again*, he thought.

“Except Kotobuki’s a friend from work, meaning I’ll see her whether you want me to or not.”

“Simple. Just quit your job.”

“You can’t just tell me to ruin my life, you know!”

Kai barked back, but Reina just turned away with a scoff as though such concerns were beneath her. But two could play at that game; Kai turned his face the other way in a huff. They continued to dig their heels in for a bit.

“Look, no matter what you tell me, I’m not gonna start avoiding her.”

“...You mean to say that I’m not the one to decide that, but you, Ashie boy?”

“Yeah. Glad you’re getting the picture.”

“I don’t have an excuse not to. It’s the same thing you said when you snapped at Matsuda’s gang. I won’t forget that any time soon.”

Reina sighed in acquiescence as though to accept that Kai was sticking to his story. She turned to face him as Kai did the same. Perhaps it was his imagination, but Reina’s expression seemed softer and her eyes kinder. He took it as a sign that he could afford to lighten up too.

“Well, it’s the same thing here.”

“Fine, I understand. Feel free to cavort with that girl of yours, Ashie boy.”

“Wait wait wait, you’re jumping to the wrong conclusion here!”

Did Reina’s brain just have no room for the concept of moderation?

“Oh, am I now?”

“I haven’t even decided to go out with her yet! And besides...”

“Besides what, may I ask?”

“It’s hard, but honestly, I’ve been doing some thinking. About yesterday.”

“Was your date less of a thrill than you hoped?”

“No, it was fun. For real. But, you know, there was more to it than that.”

Unlike hanging out with friends, there were a lot of things Kai had to be careful of while on a date. He had to strictly avoid doing the sort of things that would give his partner the wrong idea. He even had to tag along with her to shop for clothes, an activity he didn’t enjoy one bit.

“I met Kotobuki at work. She’s a ton of fun to chat with. We’ve got the same hobbies too.”

Even just yesterday, they got into such a spirited discussion about their thoughts on the anime film that they saw that they lost track of time. And he loved every moment of it.

“But we can probably do that without dating... Heck, we could probably focus more on the fun parts if we weren’t...”

“Ashie boy...I can’t tell if you’re being mature or childish.”

“Oh no, I’m a brat, honestly. I think so too.”

“And yet you still have such an innocent side to you... It’s no wonder you get along with Jun so well.”

It was a cringey line, but it felt like it had weight when it came from this queen. Unfortunately, Kai was far from used to being thought of as a love interest, so he still found the comparison pretty embarrassing.

“Ashie boy, would you allow me to give you one final word of advice, as a friend?”

“S-Sure,” said Kai. This last request lacked Reina’s typical threatening tone, so he listened with an open mind.

“If you continue cavorting with that girl, you won’t be able to meet with Jun so freely anymore.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Is it not obvious? Whichever one is your girlfriend, you’re still two-timing.”

“Even though Jun has never been more than a friend?”

“Perhaps to you, but will that girl see it that way?”

“I’ve told Kotobuki about Jun, that I have a friend who’s a girl who I hang out with almost every day. She should be well aware of her, so I doubt she’d tell me to never see her again. Unlike you.”

“Have you ever heard of the phrase, ‘love is blind’? She might have her misgivings and simply pretend that everything’s fine to avoid causing trouble.”

“Does...it work like that?”

“If I found out that my boyfriend was hanging out with another woman almost every day, rest assured that I would not be pleased.”

“...I see.” Kai had to sigh. It was the biggest, deepest one he let out that day.

“This girlfriend-boyfriend stuff really is all a pain in the neck...”

Kai let a familiar gripe slip out. Even if he were laughed at for being childish,

he couldn't deny that that was where his true feelings lay.

"Well, Ashie boy," laughed Reina with no hesitation, "will you go through with that pain in the neck?"

"I won't. I can't."

Kai gave a dispirited answer. If a romantic relationship meant he'd need to distance himself from Jun, then he was fine without a girlfriend. To Kai, Jun was far beyond someone he could consider to be optional. It would be no exaggeration to say that she was a part of his life.

"It pains me to do it, but that's what I'll tell Kotobuki." Kai sounded almost like a weight was lifted off his shoulders.

"That's a relief to hear," said Reina as she uncrossed her arms. "Apologies for the detention, by the way. See you tomorrow."

Reina was on her way as though she considered her business to be done. Now that Kai was free, he finally got off his knees and let his legs breathe. The blood rushing to his numbed limbs made him want to scream! But he stuck through it to say one last thing to Reina before she disappeared from view.

"Thanks, Ms. Reina!"

"...Excuse me?" Reina stopped in her tracks and swung around as her long eyelashes blinked in confusion.

"...Huh?" All Kai did was thank her, so he was pretty baffled as to why she was giving him such a bewildered look.

Reina asked further out of honest curiosity. "Ashie boy, why exactly are you thanking someone who called you out to a secluded staircase and forced you to sit on your knees?"

"Uh...I mean, you gave me advice. Like...as a friend."

It was a part of life that Kai was both innocent and ignorant of, so he found it helpful to have it pointed out to him. As such, he said something in return that he assumed was only natural. And yet, Reina's eyes told him that she couldn't believe this idiot. Why?

"...Fine, fine, you're very welcome." Reina accepted Kai's gratitude even if she

had to shrug in exasperation while doing it. She now left for real, but not before leaving him with these parting words:

“Ashie boy...I *really* can't tell if you're being mature or childish.”





Once Reina left, Kai went straight home. He worked about twice a week, and that night he had a shift from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m.

He grabbed some croquettes from the fridge to hold himself over before heading out. They were best sellers at his mom's favorite bakery; their crusts were smothered in coarse, high quality bread crumbs that kept their crunch even after being reheated in the microwave. The finely mashed potatoes inside gave the center a chewy texture, which contrasted with the small pockets of ground beef scattered throughout. Together, they harmonized into a succulent symphony that raised the status of the humble croquette into a side dish of epic proportions. Harnessing the power of his growing boy appetite, Kai downed three of them with ease. Then off he went, pedaling his bike with glee toward Beaver Video Rental, store #4.

When Kai arrived slightly ahead of his start time, he took a look at the shift schedule in the break room. He figured that if he wanted to break it to Kotobuki it was best to do so in person, and so he checked when the next time they'd share a shift would be. They used to get scheduled together pretty often since Kai had been serving as her mentor, but their manager apparently figured it was about time for the baby bird to leave the nest and gradually started giving them different shifts.

Hmm, this is some bad timing. We don't share a shift until next week. He might as well call her to a meet at a restaurant or something tomorrow. Since he still had a bit of time, he took out his smartphone to send her a message over LINE...until he noticed that Kotobuki herself had already sent him one asking if he had time before his shift. It must have come while he was on his bike.

Kai dug through his sticker collection and sent a picture of Kotori Itsuka saying "I suppose I must" with a smirk. His message was instantly marked as read.

"I wish to have a serious discussion," came Kotobuki's next message.

Kai wondered what it could have been about. He sent his response with a bit of trepidation.

“Whatever might you wish to discuss?”

“Could we perhaps have a get-together with Miyakawa in the coming days?”

Huh? Kai thought, checking the screen multiple times to make sure he wasn’t seeing things. *What’s gotten into her?*

“Would this happen to be a joke too highbrow for my understanding?”

“No, it was a straightforward question. Would it present a problem?”

“Not to me, I suppose, and Jun would surely jump at the chance.”

If anything, Jun was probably still miffed that she got left out yesterday.

“Then I shall take that to mean there is no problem. I’m available any day besides those that I have work, so I shall leave the scheduling to you.”

“Very well,” answered Kai, even though he saw nothing *but* problems with this idea. “However, I had the impression that you weren’t going to get along with Jun.”

“Heaven forbid. I felt she was a wonderful woman even at first glance.”

For real? Kai could only recall the dead fish eyes she had while her face was buried in Jun’s bosom.

“Are you certain you aren’t mistaking her for Reina, the other person we met at the time?”

“The one who hugged me and failed to relinquish me referred to herself as ‘Miyakawa,’ so I’m fairly certain there’s no mistake.”

Yep, there wasn’t. That had to be Jun.

“If possible, I would like to have more opportunities for the three of us to spend time together in the future.”

...Really, thought Kai, *what’s gotten into her? I’ve got no clue what kind of expression Kotobuki sent these messages with...*

It’s hard to know what someone really means when you can’t see them, but either way, Kai couldn’t find a reason to turn Kotobuki down if she really wanted to hang with Jun. His shift was starting soon, so he told her he’d talk over their schedules with Jun and get back to her.

Hmm, that didn't go how I expected...

Kai really did mean to tell Kotobuki that he couldn't go out with her since he wanted to stay friends with Jun, but the conversation flowed in a different direction.

He watched the reply from Kotobuki pop up, saying that this was the perfect chance since she wished to hang with Miyakawa as well. Of course, if that were all there was to her request, then it'd be everything Kai could ever hope for...which is why it seemed too good to be true. Kai wasn't sure if he should be honestly happy or cautiously concerned.

...Nah, racking my brain over it isn't gonna give me an answer, thought Kai. He was better off not bringing his anxieties to work with him.

Man, this girlfriend-boyfriend stuff takes effort...

Episode 003: Miyakawa's Feeling Generous

"And this is my house," said Kai as he pointed out the foyer of his home. It was just a run-of-the-mill two-story building in a run-of-the-mill suburb, but to Kotobuki, it was...

"Q-Quite the magnificent home." Kai almost pitied how nervously she gave her unnecessary courtesies. In an even more unnecessary gesture, she handed him a paper bag with a gift box of sweets inside as she shakingly said, "Please accept my meager tribute..."

"No, like, what're you givin' this to me for? My mom's inside, give it to her." Kai couldn't resist blurting that out at Kotobuki's typical social anxiety. His polite tone couldn't keep up.

"Y-Y-Y-Y-Your mother? Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What if she thinks I'm u-u-u-unbecoming of you?!"

"Chill, you're not trying to introduce yourself as her daughter-in-law." Kai's mom wasn't the type to size up anyone that harshly to begin with. "If anything, my family'll go to the other extreme and get too chummy for their own good. Apologies in advance for that."

"Th-Th-That's, er, a tad intimidating in its own way," choked Kotobuki as her eyes began to water.

This newbie was lacking in every area of human communication. And yet, she'd start acting like a smug brat the moment she got used to someone. Yep, she was cute.

It was the day after Kotobuki suggested the three of them should hang out. Kai started scheduling it with Jun over LINE the moment he got home from work the previous night.

"Hey, Kotobuki said she wanted us all to hang out together soon."

"FR?"

“FR.”

Jun responded to Kai's short confirmation with a sticker of Fumino Furuhashi looking up and saying, "I'll hold you to that!" It was late and Kai was tired from work, so he gave a random reply with a sticker of Popuko waving her arm and shouting, "FOO~!"

“Anyway, Jun, when are you free?”

“Tomorrow!”

“That soon?!”

Kai's instant statement of surprise was followed by a custom message sticker of Gan Ning (courtesy name Xingba) attacking a fortress while shouting, "I am the first to smooch!"

C'mon, thought Kai, don't make historical warriors say stuff like that...

“Can you please take this seriously?”

“Sorry, I couldn’t stop my overflowing joy.”

"I'm starting to fear for Kotobuki's safety so let's pretend I never asked."

Kai sent his message with a stone face and got a sticker of Umaru throwing a tantrum and shouting “I don’t wanna!” in return.

“Can you please be serious?”

“Can *you* please learn to take a joke?”

A joke, she says. Kai was curious if she'd be able to handle a video call. You know, to prove she wasn't making any unladylike chortles.

“Okay, jokes aside, tomorrow’s way too soon. Can you at least wait until the weekend?”

[illegible]

“Don’t go all yandere on me!”

“I was simply expressing the depths of my love through the medium of text.”

“Well the text you wrote reads like a horror novel, so you might be in too deep.”

“Anyway, I want tomorrow! I can’t wait!”

Kai was amazed that she was this obsessed with cute girls. He sighed, then responded, “Got it. If Kotobuki agrees, anyway.”

Jun responded with a custom message sticker of Zhang Fei (courtesy name Yide) saying “Why, I’m thankful! Ever so thankful!” with a sinister smile. Once again, Kai thought ancient warriors deserved a bit more respect, but he sent Jun’s answer to Kotobuki anyway. He didn’t expect her to agree to tomorrow, but surprisingly, she gave the okay.

“Hooraaaaaaaay!!!!!”

Kai could just imagine the happy dance Jun was doing as she sent that message.

Kai concluded his evening by getting his homework done, taking a bath, brushing his teeth, and reading the newly published volume six of *29 to JK*, but Jun bombarded him with messages the whole time. For the rest of the night, new questions popped up like “What should I wear?” or “Does Hotey like ice cream? Would she like it if I brought her some?” or “What brand should I get her?”

And they kept coming! Not that Kai even had any answers to give her!

“You sound like it’s the night before a date,” said Kai to his smartphone. As his eyelids began to fall heavy, he pointed out to the device in his hands that “Well, it ain’t one.”

Of course, he left every message Jun sent on read.

Anyway, that was what led to today. Kai met Kotobuki after school at the closest station to his house, Watarai, and showed her the way to his home. They both came straight from school, so Kai was still in his Asagi High uniform while Kotobuki was in her Ginga High uniform.

“Really though, Kotobuki,” said Kai as he led her into the foyer. “Don’t feel like you have to hold back. Treat my home like you would your own.”

Honestly, even the gift box Kotobuki brought was a bit much. She didn’t need to overthink it and go that far. Maybe her family was just really straitlaced, or maybe the gift box was what Kotobuki felt she needed to put her mind at ease, to lower the hurdle of entering the front door of a friend’s house ever so slightly. Kai didn’t press the issue, though.

“I’m home!” announced Kai to his family. “And I brought a friend!”

“Good heavens,” gasped his mom as she peeked out of the kitchen. “You brought home *another* cute friend?”

“I told you all just this morning that I was bringing a girl from work over!”

“But, but, I didn’t think she’d be *this* cute! Not when Jun’s already a miracle wasted on you!”

“I’m pretty sure that’s an insult to both me *and* Kotobuki. What kind of girl did you *expect* her to be?”

“I figured it had to be a girl who looked just like you...”

“How does everyone come up with the same idea around here? Is that seriously how you imagine my friends?!”

“I at *least* wouldn’t imagine a girl this cute to be *your* friend!”

“You know, there are *probably* some things you shouldn’t say to your own kid’s face!”

She could at least stop repeating “cute” so often. It was making Kotobuki turn pale and mutter, “I must strive for cuteness... I must live up to his mother’s hopes...” to herself like it was some sort of mantra.

“Let us go to my room,” suggested Kai. He hurried the debilitatingly shy Kotobuki up the stairs to protect her from any further influence from his eccentric mother. Once they entered the ten-square-foot bedroom and Kai closed the door, Kotobuki placed a hand to her chest and breathed a sigh of relief. To Kai, it seemed like the opposite order of reactions a girl would typically have when entering a boy’s room for the first time.

Guess that just goes to show how comfortable she feels around me, he concluded. Kai gave the tip of his nose a nervous scratch. Him and Kotobuki were finally starting to loosen up, when suddenly...

“Hey **Ashie**, did you seriously bring home another mega-cutie?!”

“Gaaaaaah Sis I’m begging you, *please* learn to knock!”

Kai fought back against his sister, Serena, who suddenly appeared by swinging the door open.

“Omigosh, she really *is* a cutie! What’s she doing with *you*?!”

“Sis...I told you that unlike Jun, Kotobuki’s a sensitive girl, right? I told you not to be super annoying, right?!” Kai pushed his sister into the hall to protect his debilitatingly shy friend from her.

“What’s the big deal? You callin’ me a nuisance?”

“I am saying in absolutely no uncertain terms that you’re a nuisance.”

“Oh? Mind telling me what you wanna get your coworker all alone for? Perv.”

“Look, Jun’s coming over soon anyway, so it’s not like I wanna be *alone*.”

“I dunno, seems fishy to me. What’s a greasy nerd like you doing with not just Jun, but now this girl in the palm of your hand? I just don’t know what this country’s coming to...”

“Well you’re the sociology major, so how about you go study it? In college.”

“Is this what the legends call the ‘popular streak’? Is it real? Then how come I never had one?!”

“Yeah, yeah, good luck at your next mixer, Sis, I’m sure you’ll find someone wonderful.”

“Oh god, having *you* take pity on me pisses me off. Spill the beans. What trick are you pulling here? Is it hypnosis?”

“Yep, you got me, it’s hypnosis.” Kai had no energy left to correct her, so he went back to his room now that he was done pushing his sister into hers. He

saw that Kotobuki looked dumbfounded, as though she heard everything the two said. Kai had to chuckle.

“My apologies that my sister made you witness something so embarrassing.”

“N-No, not at all! Perish the thought. She’s a truly wonderful sister.”

It was kind of adorable how utterly unconvincing her assist was.

“S-So, ‘Kai’ really isn’t your first name, then?”

And Kai had to love how desperate she was to change the subject.

“Indeed, my real name is ‘Ash.’ My family calls me ‘Ashie.’”

This time, Kai had to chuckle at his own expense.

Kai had already come clean with Kotobuki about his name. They were dating with the potential to be in a relationship, so he felt it would be dishonest to hide the truth forever. Too bad Kotobuki took it as a joke and didn’t believe him at first! Which just wounded him even deeper because it meant that his name was just that ridiculous!

Still, it didn’t matter for long. Because when he asked her to just call him “Kai,” she stammered, “I-It’s far too embarrassing to switch to a first name basis all of a sudden, so I’d prefer to continue using ‘Nakamura.’”

She turned beet red and couldn’t look him in the eyes as she continued, “B-But one day, I promise...I will call you ‘Kai.’”

Her bashfulness was irresistibly cute.

Pardon the digression.

“Well, no need to stand around to talk, so please, have a seat,” suggested Kai to Kotobuki. “Oh, I typically use my bed as a sofa, but I suppose you’d have some reservations about sitting on a boy’s bed, right? Worry not, I have a cushion you’re welcome to use.”

Today would finally be the day that Kai would make up for that fateful mistake one year ago where he was unprepared and made Jun sit on his bed!

He was proud of himself, until...

“How does Miyakawa typically sit?”

“Well, uh, like I said, on the bed.”

“Then I shall be content with doing the same. Since it’s your bed, I don’t mind at all.”

Kotobuki’s expression quickly shifted to a self-satisfied smile as she sat down on the bed with zero hesitation. Perhaps it was Kai’s imagination, but he thought he saw something flicker deep within her eyes. What was she so fired up over?

“By all means, Nakamura, take a seat yourself.”

“Oh, right. Don’t mind if I do.”

Strange, Kai felt as though their lines—if not their positions—had been flipped. Either way, Kai gently rested his rear on the bed next to her. Once he was settled in, Kotobuki started fidgeting and scooted toward him at the speed of a snail.

Ah, should I have sat closer to her? Should I not be modest about it?

As Kai contemplated the meaning of her motions, Kotobuki put some distance between them while she continued squirming.

Yo, what the heck?

Afterward, Kotobuki looked like she steeled her resolve and fidgeted back toward Kai. Then her cheeks turned red as she scuttled away from him again. Given how long this cycle repeated itself for, she seemed to be struggling to measure the exact distance of their personal space.

“Hmm, are your back and forth movements the First Form of Wave Breathing? It must be derived from Water Breathing, no?”

“D-Don’t patronize me! This isn’t Total Concentration.”

Kotobuki snapped back, but she forced herself to regain her self-satisfied look before continuing.

“Incidentally, where might Miyakawa be? Did you not depart school

together?”

“Right. I intended to do so, but Jun demanded that she go home first to change clothes.”

“So, she *does* see me as a threat?”

“A what?” Kai saw that flicker in Kotobuki’s eyes again, but he was so confused by what she said that he blanked out.

“D-Does she not?”

“It seemed she wanted to dress her best to ensure she left you with a good first impression.”

“I-Is that so? I’m a tad embarrassed to have made such a mistaken assumption.” Kotobuki desperately tried to hide said embarrassment by covering her face and turning away.

See her as a threat? How? Kai found that line so strange that he wanted to ask Kotobuki about it, but she asked a question of her own before he could.

“...Nakamura, there is one thing I would like you to make clear.”

“Sure, what might that be?”

“Since you say Miyakawa is dressing up for me...would she happen to be the hardcore yuri type?”

“Meaning?”

“Well, it would explain quite a few things about her.”

“Um? Explain what?”

“Oh, my apologies. You needn’t concern yourself with that, a simple answer to the question would suffice.”

“I assure you that she’s not like that, though I can’t blame you for feeling as though your life could be in danger regardless.” Truth be told, even Kai had a tinge of doubt. Just a tinge.

“According to Jun, girls love all manner of cute things,” continued Kai as he explained what Jun told him the day before, save for the part where Jun said she had the same feelings toward Kotobuki that she did toward stuffed animals.

That was a request, after all.

“I see, that’s an emotion I can deeply understand,” said Kotobuki. Contrary to Kai’s expectations, her face immediately lit up as she found that answer either acceptable, relieving, or possibly even relatable.

“You can understand?”

“I can! I have a niece four years younger than myself and she is irresistibly adorable. When my younger brother acts bratty I simply can’t stand it, but when she does it, I just want to smile and hug her.”

Kotobuki certainly made a persuasive argument.

“Anyway, thank you for your answer. I’m grateful to know that I was merely overthinking.”

“By all means, do become friends with her. I’ll be here to stop her if I decide her physical affection gets to be too much.”

“Excellent! My fate is in your hands, Nakamura.”

“Ha ha ha, surely you exaggerate.”

“My fate really is in your hands, though..”

“...Ha ha ha.”

Kai heard honest concern in that plea and let out a strained laugh in return.

Wait, does this mean that she still can’t handle Jun? Then what’s she trying to get along for?! On the other hand, why else would Kotobuki want to hang out with her?

Nothing Kai thought of led to an answer. He wasn’t dense, but he wasn’t enough of an adult to see through every trick in the book.



If dark clouds were forming in Kai’s heart, then a storm was raging in Kotobuki’s. Kai’s first instinct was right on the mark—Kotobuki still hadn’t warmed up to Jun. To someone as shy as Kotobuki, a girl who’d get right in her face at first sight was like a natural predator. The “normie” aura that Jun exuded from every pore made it clear that she belonged to an entirely different

world.

Now, why would Kotobuki ask to hang out with such a formidable foe? Kai wasn't able to reach the answer himself, but the truth was by no means complicated. Kotobuki first laid eyes on Nakamura's "girl friend" during their date two days ago and the sight shocked her. Of course, Kotobuki had heard plenty of stories about her—Kai told them quite frequently. She even knew enough about this friend to give Kai advice over a string of predicaments they'd found themselves in not long ago. But discovering that this friend was such a bombshell turned out to be quite the bombshell for Kotobuki.

Looking back, she realized that she had made some wild assumptions. She imagined Jun was a boyish troublemaker, or was maybe just super chill, but generally not the type to give off feminine vibes. But in a good way, of course; Kotobuki had a girl like that in her own class who she held in high regard.

But reality was ruthless. When Kotobuki found out that Jun Miyakawa, aka Kai's best friend, was a ten out of ten hottie, she nearly fainted. Her thoughts couldn't help but spiral downward: *If Nakamura spends five days a week with such a cute, clingy girl, won't he eventually fall for her? Are they seriously not dating?!*

Even after she came home from the date, she rolled around in anguish on her bed...until she had an idea.

I have to be sure. I need to check with my own two eyes.

What was Kai and Jun's relationship *really* like? Of course, Kotobuki didn't think that Kai was hiding the fact that they were lovers. That'd be cheating, which was a level of cowardice Kai just wasn't the type to stoop to. Kotobuki had spent her life observing people, so she was confident in her call.

But I can't deny the possibility that Nakamura might come to fall for that person, thought Kotobuki before she buried her face in her pillow and bit the cover in sorrow. Just entertaining the thought tugged at her heartstrings, but she couldn't run away from the truth.

That said, it took Kotobuki quite a long time to realize that the esteem she held for Kai early on was in fact the first crush of her life. Kai was a reliable mentor, but also a bit naive (in an oh-so-dreamy way!), so it was perfectly

plausible that he just didn't know how to differentiate between like and love with this girl friend of his.

And on top of that, how does that woman feel about Nakamura? If anything, this was the bigger issue. Now that she had been made painfully aware of how unreliable Kai's word on the matter could be, she was left with almost no idea of who this Jun Miyakawa girl was.

I mean, in what universe is going to a guy's house five days a week not a sign of being in love?! She's like, locked on to him! No, I bet she's been acting like she's already his girlfriend! Actually, forget that, I wanna go to his place five days a week! Kotobuki pounded her covers in a tantrum as she lay flat on the bed.

But upon further thought, the laws of the universe might not apply to someone like Jun. It wasn't just her well-proportioned face that was out of this world (because Kotobuki was confident that two could play at that game). Jun's particular aura made one feel that she came from a different plane of existence. Kotobuki had never imagined what went through the heads of those who mastered the path of the normie, so there was no personality too outlandish to be a possibility. Maybe she was a man-eater who was so used to having a smorgasbord of college boys and working adults on speed dial that she treated a mere high schooler as little more than a pet hamster. Or maybe she was committed to the path of yuri, in which case she wouldn't have any romantic interest in the opposite sex to begin with.

Ooooooh, the more I think about it, the less I get it! Kotobuki, still face-down on her bed, went as still as a corpse.

But it was because she didn't get it that she had to confirm it with her own two eyes. She would have Kai let her in on their little hangouts. She'd spent enough time observing people; if she could see how they always acted, she was confident that she would soon uncover the truth of how they felt. And no matter what future she saw...

I won't lose to her! Kotobuki lit a fire beneath her otherwise weak, flinching heart.

So, in short, Kotobuki came over to Kai's house looking for a fight.



Kai and Kotobuki engaged in some anime talk as they waited for Jun to arrive. Since Kai had joked about Water Breathing earlier, they went straight into their thoughts about episode seven of *Demon Slayer*. The anime only started airing the previous month, but Kai had already read up to the latest volume of the source material. However, Kotobuki was an anime-only fan, so he had to be wary of spoilers.

"I suppose such excellence is only natural for ufotable, but was Muzan's sinister aura not exquisite, Kotobuki?"

"Quite exquisite, indeed. However, I can't help but feel that Kibutsuji is merely a stepping stone toward the true villain."

"Oh? And your reasoning?"

"The source material is a *Jump* manga. When compared to the plots of its peers, Kibutsuji's appearance is far too early. If he *were* the final boss, then would it not be difficult for the manga to reach a run of thirty or forty volumes?"

"A fair point, one I hadn't considered myself."

"If I were to make a prediction, I would say that the true villain will be a fire-type, one that Tanjiro could prove to be a trump card against once he's mastered Water Breathing."

"I see, that would be quite the dramatic twist. I'd like to see it myself."

Kai figured that Kotobuki's predictions probably wouldn't come to pass since he'd read ahead and knew how the plot played out from there, but he didn't let his judgment show. To a dyed-in-the-wool otaku like Kai, this kind of sensitivity was second nature. But the real reason was that he truly did enjoy listening to Kotobuki's theories, and he wasn't lying when he said that he wanted to see those twists if they really did happen.

Given Kotobuki's tastes, she'll definitely get really into Shinobu. I hope she shows up in the anime soon; I'd love to talk about our favorite characters.

Kai continued their discussion while being quite excited for the coming weeks.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

“That’s probably Jun,” whispered Kai. He could tell that Kotobuki immediately tensed up from the news, making him worry about how long she could last if she was already on edge. They heard Jun’s voice greeting Kai’s mom in the foyer...and the next moment, they heard the footsteps of Jun bolting up the stairs.

“I’m here!”

“Does *anyone* knock around here?”

Then again, those footsteps told him exactly what to prepare for.

“Allow me to reintroduce myself! I’m Jun Miyakawa! Call me Jun!”

Jun sat down right next to Kotobuki (opposite from Kai) with no remorse and aggressively introduced herself. The outfit she chose was a springtime sweater with vertical stripes, a lightly colored skirt, and black stockings; she looked just like the kind of hot older lady an otaku would love. Yep, she was desperate to get on Kotobuki’s good side.

Truth be told, Kai had his concerns when Jun said she’d be “dressing up.” Was she going to go overboard? Was she going to show up absolutely cracked out wearing cutting edge fashion that was far beyond the understanding of any otaku? Kai worried that she might really creep Kotobuki out.

Fortunately, his fears proved to be unfounded. This was Jun, the woman who walked the earth with the power of normies and anime on her side. Her shots always hit their marks. Given that Kotobuki didn’t seem too nervous, Kai would say her hard work paid off.

“I am Kotobuki Hotei. A pleasure to meet you.” Kotobuki’s cheeks twitched a bit, but she was still able to manage a proper introduction.

“Gotcha, Hotey! The pleasure’s all mine!”

“P-Please don’t call me by my last name!”

“Was that rude? Is that a no-no?”

“Calling me ‘Hotei’ makes people think of Buddha, and that fatso’s image doesn’t suit mine.”

“But isn’t it cuter if I add a ‘y’ to the end of it? I think it works!”

“D-Does it really?”

“When I was a kid, I hated when people called me ‘Miyakawa’ since it was so hard to pronounce. But when my friends thought up a cute version of it and started calling me ‘Myaakawa,’ I started to like it.”

“I-I see, that’s fine for you, so...”

“So ‘Hotey’ it is!” shouted Jun as she tried to close the emotional *and* physical distance between them. Kotobuki recoiled from this invasion of her personal space. “By the way, to celebrate our newfound friendship, I bought you some ice cream!”

She actually went through with that, huh...

“I wasn’t sure what brand you liked, so I went with Dazs!”

And she went all out, huh?

“Here’s yours, Kai! It’s vanilla! I went with cookies and cream myself!”

“Oh, thanks.”

Jun took out a few cups of ice cream out of the supermarket bag she brought over. Kai happily accepted his, while Jun put hers on her lap.

“And for Hotey, I got strawberry and rich milk and green tea and macadamia nut and double belgian chocolate chip and even assam-ceylon tea latte!”

Jun handed over more ice cream cups than Kotobuki could handle.

“Hold up, how come Kotobuki gets so many?!” asked Kai. The shock of her gift made Kotobuki freeze so she couldn’t do it herself.

“I mean, I didn’t know what flavor she liked, so I figured I couldn’t go wrong if I just bought them all!”

“Don’t act like that’s the logical choice here...”

“Anyway, Hotey, feel free to eat however many cups of whichever flavors you

like!”

Jun pressured Kotobuki to eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, and eat. It was a lavish power play funded by the generous allowances of her brothers. She came fully prepared to buy Kotobuki’s affection. However, Kotobuki wouldn’t give in so easily.

“Miyakawa, what machinations do you have in forcing me to eat all this?” Something flared up within her, and it was strong enough to melt away her hesitation.

“O-Oh dearie me. ‘Machinations,’ you say. Don’t be silly!”

Jun gave a muddled response, as though she would never even *dream* of buying a person’s affection. Kai wasn’t going to bail her out, though; she was only getting her just deserts. But Kotobuki’s real point of contention took an entirely different angle...a rather obtuse one, at that.

“Your scheme is to feed me all of these and fatten me up, isn’t it?”

“Huh?” Kai and Jun blurted out in unison. Their expressions were mirror images of each other’s befuddlement.

“A-Are you not?” said Kotobuki, figuring her assumption might have been off after seeing their reactions. But she’d apparently committed too much to pull back, so Kotobuki the emotional trainwreck continued in a pitifully shaking voice.

“D-Did you not calculate that making me gain weight would be the quickest avenue to eliminating me as a rival? You ‘partiers’ have crafted a sinister hierarchy beneath your jovial surface, so is this not one of your underhanded tactics obtained from years of survival in your dog-eat-dog world?”

“K-Kai?! Hotey’s got a bias against normies! An incredibly deep one!”

“Uhh...I mean, that’s not too far from what I always figured they were like...”

“Don’t get me wrong, lil’ Hotey! This ice cream comes from the goodness of my heart! It’s a hundred percent honest!”

“Bull, we know what you’re after...”

“Besides, it’s just five or six cups! You won’t get fat off of that, so don’t worry

and eat up!”

“...Miyakawa, what basis do you have to speak such nonsense?”

“I mean, *I’ve* never gotten fat, so I’m living proof!” Jun’s desperate defense made Kotobuki’s eyes roll back in her head.

“And besides, the parts you want to grow need some nutrition to do it!” Jun supported her prominent, sizable bust with her hands and showed them off with a bit of jiggling. Kotobuki’s eyes retreated even further.

“It can’t be,” said Kotobuki with a shaking voice. “You say that all the nutrition that should be going to your stomach or head instead goes only to your boobs? I can’t believe the anime stereotype...exists in real life...”

“K-Kai?! Hotey’s super funny! It’s not fair, how come she gets to be cute *and* funny?!”

“You’re definitely the one with the cheat powers to her.”

“Aww Hotey, you don’t think that, right?”

“Miyakawa is the enemy of all women. The enemy of the world, Contra Mundi...”

“Oh nooooooooo! I can’t go on living if Hotey hates me!” Jun’s eyes teared up as she clung to Kotobuki. She was completely unaware that bouncing her bust against Kotobuki at point-blank range was having the opposite effect.

“Hey now, this establishment keeps everything above board. No touching Kotobuki.”

“...Aww.”

“Don’t ‘aww’ me. You’re the one who’s gotta restrain herself, so we’re switching seats too.”

Kai told Jun to keep her hands off of Kotobuki and sat himself between them for good measure. Kotobuki was visibly relieved to have a bulwark protecting her. Jun, however, pursed her lips at being separated from her cute, adorable Hotey.

“Oh, *I* see what you’re after, Kai. That desperate to have a cutie on each side,

huh? Gotta have your harem, huh? Bet you're gonna snap a selfie and spread it all over the internet."

"Can you *please* grow up?" Kai squinted and glared at Jun. With her bluff called, Jun clung to him and tried to take a selfie of her own. Kai would rather she didn't—it was bad for his heart.

"An excellent idea. By all means, please take a photo of the three of us as a sign of our friendship. Though I'd rather it not be spread online." Kotobuki's eyes suddenly flared up. With her bluff called, she clung to Kai too. Kai would much prefer she didn't—it was bad for his heart.

"Whoa, really? I get a photo with Hotey?! I won't get billed later, will I?"

"This isn't a maid cafe..."

"Worry not, I would never charge."

"Omigosh!" shouted Jun in joy. "I'll treasure it for the rest of my life!"

With her dramatic line out of the way, she took a flurry of pictures of the three of them squished together. Her camerawork put an emphasis on Kotobuki, who was off to one side making a heart mark with her hands. And there was Kai in the middle, looking as out of place as could be.

She might have been right, thought Kai as he winced at the pictures sent to him over LINE. The truth was painfully obvious from an objective point of view. This was the selfie of a man with a babe on each arm. What gave it an additional level of immoral impact was something he had until now taken for granted: this was a picture of girls sitting on his *bed*. If this had been a photo of strangers, he'd undoubtedly curse the man in the middle and wish him a swift death in a fire.

"Hotey, can you friend me so I can send it to you?"

"Very well."

"Kotobuki?! Are you certain this menace should have your contact information?! Will you not regret this?!"

"It matters not. I would sell my soul to the devil himself to obtain this photo."

With her resolve hardened, Kotobuki whipped out her smartphone and

offered it to Jun.

“Is it that big a deal?”

“I could cry! Hotey, let’s put it on our lock screens as a symbol of our friendship!”

“A brilliant idea. Let us use it as our lock screens as a symbol of our amity, Miyakawa.”

Kotobuki nonchalantly responded as she opened the photo she received in an image editing app and nonchalantly cropped out the left side of the picture that contained Jun. For a while after that, the two of them looked on in glee at the photos now displayed on their smartphone screens—yes, even Kotobuki was smiling.

Kai didn’t have the courage to set it as his lock screen, but he placed it in a folder for safekeeping.

In the end, the three of them decided to eat one ice cream cup each and then to offer the remainder to the Nakamura household.

“I’ll take these down to the kitchen and get some spoons while I’m there.”

After a good deal of rumination, Kotobuki reached for the green tea cup. Kai put the remainder in the shopping bag and carried them downstairs. They wouldn’t go bad in the freezer, so nothing to worry about there.

As long as I make sure to tell Mom and Sis not to dig into them, anyway. He told his mom firmly when he reached the first floor and saw her preparing dinner.

With three metal spoons in hand, Kai hurried back to his room. He felt bad about leaving someone as shy as Kotobuki all alone with Jun.

They seem to be hitting it off better than I thought, though. Not like Jun’s ever been the one to shrink away from people, even if I wish she did for once. Kai had to chuckle as he assumed they’d get through the night without any major bumps in the road.

Well, you know what they say about assumptions.

Kai returned to the second floor and opened his bedroom door without a second thought...

“...What the heck led to *this*?”

...Only to find a completely topless Jun smiling as she covered her boobs with her hands (performing what one might call the “handbra”) while Kotobuki stared bug-eyed at them at point-blank range.

“Is this heaven? Or a vision of hell?”

Kai was unsure of what reaction he was supposed to have, so he settled on spinning right around and leaving the room. After waiting a bit for Jun to put on her *actual* bra and clothes again...

“We’re reeeeady,” came the voice of the perpetrator. Jun opened the door from the inside and gave a blushing giggle.

“At least pretend to be embarrassed,” said Kai in exasperation as he entered his own bedroom.

“Hey, nothin’ I can do. It was all for Hotey, after all.”

“I can think of a lot of things you could’ve done...”

That did raise the question of what sequence of events led to Jun whipping out her boobs for Kotobuki.

“Well ya see, Hotey said she wanted to learn what Reina taught me about how to make your boobs get bigger!”

“Aaaaaah! Gaaaaah! Aaaaaugh!”

In a rare case of Kotobuki raising her voice, she started shouting to cut off Jun’s explanation. She apparently didn’t want Kai to receive this information, but sadly, he heard the whole thing.

“...Huh, I always figured work like that was beneath Ms. Reina.”

“Hardly. She spares no effort when it comes to beauty. She *is* aiming to be a pro model.”

“Well, makes sense.” Kai could agree with that part. As for the other? “But, naw. Showing your boobs in a boy’s room is just, naw.”

“There’s nothing I won’t take off for Hotey!”

“Being proud of it isn’t gonna make it okay...”

Bringing Kotobuki into it was also kinda missing the point.

“I mean, c’mon, it’s no big deal. After all we’ve been through, what’s a little exposure between buds?”

“You *sure* it’s no big deal?” Kai was about to ask if she’d suddenly be okay with him hitting up her place and whipping out a raging boner the moment she left him alone, but thought better of it. It was such a lowbrow comeback that he just gave up.

“Besides, Kai, you could’ve knocked before barging in! Aren’t you the one who complains about nobody else knocking?”

“Fine, my sincerest apologies, literally everything was my fault!”

Jun pursed her lips, so Kai bowed on his hands and knees to appease her. Kotobuki seemed apologetic to Kai, though.

“I merely asked the question on a whim, I never dreamed that Miyakawa would go so far as to remove her own garments...”

But you were still ogling them pretty closely, weren’t you? You seemed pretty darn interested in the subject!

Kai was a man with some amount of tact, so he kept that thought to himself.

“Well, it makes my advice clearer if I demonstrate with a visual aid!”

Jun continued to defend herself, but she was really just trying to hide her embarrassment now that she was in front of Kai. Her cheeks had reddened just a bit.

Look, I’m embarrassed too. How am I supposed to know how to react after seeing my friend do a handbra pose?

Kai cleared his throat with an “Ahem.”

“Anyway, let’s eat this ice cream before it melts!”

“J-Jun did go through the trouble of buying it, after all!”

“A-And we’ll play some games after!”

With the three of them now accomplices to the same crime, they all decided to pretend they saw nothing.

Episode 004: The Expert Gamer's Guide to Welcoming a Beginner into the Fold (Hey, How About Co-Op?)

With their ice cream finished, the conversation now moved on to what game they should play. Kai sat on the bed between the other two and faced the screen.

“What do you two typically play?”

Kai and Jun looked at each other to ponder the question Kotobuki presented.

“I guess *Tanks* and *Warships*?”

“Also we’ve gotten back into *Monster Hunter*.” It was just ten days ago that the release date for the massive expansion *Iceborne* was announced, which led to many joyful screams and high-fives between Jun and Kai.

“*Tanks* and *Warships* are a little technical, so let’s leave those for now.”

“Have you ever played *Monster Hunter*, Hotey?”

“My apologies. My little brother appeared to play it on his 3DS, but personally...”

Kotobuki shook her head back and forth in apology. The sight of this adorable behavior made Jun reel back from the pain in her chest. She apparently had to be melodramatic over everything.

“Well, Kotobuki, what games do you typically play?” asked Kai in return.

Kotobuki was an anime otaku. She was a hardcore viewer who made sure to watch the first episode of every anime each season to see for herself which shows would suit her tastes.

Conversely, she didn’t partake in manga or light novels very often. Particularly manga—she always limited her horizons by saying that manga was too quick to

read through, giving it a poor amount of entertainment for the cost. Of course, Kotobuki had been a middle schooler until very recently, and she had barely three months of work experience under her belt. Kai read between the lines and could infer that she was making do with what little allowance she was given, so in a way, it made perfect sense that her main medium of choice would be the one she could watch for free.

But now that he thought about it, Kai had never actually heard her talk about her experience with games.

“My little brother has a Switch. Sometimes we play *Mario Kart*, *Smash*, and the like together. Though, calling what I do ‘play’ may be a bit generous...”

Her choice of words clearly implied she wasn’t too great with action games. Kai turned to Jun and they gave each other knowing looks.

“I don’t own a PS4. My brother wishes to have one, but...”

“Yeah, they’re expensive.”

Even among Kai’s circle of friends, people who owned both were in the minority. It was far more common for them to choose a console based on the games they wanted to play, if they or their parents could afford either one at all. In that sense, Kai and Jun might have been blessed to have families that were so understanding toward games that they were able to collect both consoles back in middle school.

“Well, how about mobile games?” Today’s teenagers had a strong ally: plenty of them owned a smartphone even if they didn’t own a console.

“Ah, those... I’m a casual F2P player who only touches them on occasion. My friends and I have played *School Idol Festival* for a long while, and I enjoy the *DanMemo* game for its cute, chibi characters and excellent story.”

“What about *FGO*?!” asked Kai, a bit forcefully, about the game he’d been the most addicted to. He wanted a fellow comrade.

“What about *FGO*?!” asked Jun, with around the same level of force, about the game she’d been the most addicted to. She seemed to want a fellow comrade.

“M-My apologies... I’m interested in it due to the anime airing in the fall...but I always imagined it to be a game that required a large investment in the franchise,” lamented Kotobuki. Sounds like she hadn’t been able to find the opportunity to play it. “...Er, would it be best if I began playing it?”

“...Nah, Hotey, I won’t ask you to go that far.”

“...Yeah, Jun’s right. Games aren’t something you should have to play by force.”

While Kai and Jun were being honest with their words, their disappointment was real as well. Kotobuki, given her low self esteem, took it far too personally and immediately acted like she was at a funeral.

“B-But hey, we didn’t come here to play phone games, right?”

“Y-Yeah, let’s talk about games the three of us can play together!”

“R-Right, we got off track!”

Anyway, they could tell that Kotobuki wasn’t too experienced with games. Being bad at action games put an additional bottleneck on what they could do together; most games made to be played by multiple people tended to be action-oriented.

“I-I’m rather skilled at *Mario Kart*! I can give my brother a run for his money.”

Kotobuki read the room and cutely clenched her fist to reassure them. Jun clutched her heart once again while crying about how precious she was. Kai chose to ignore her.

“Okay, Kotobuki, what’s your record on Thwomp Ruins in Time Trials?”

“Huh? My record?” Kotobuki, the casual gamer, seemed confused as to whether she was supposed to know that offhand. The two hardcore gamers beside her looked at each other, surprised that she *didn’t* know that offhand.

“L-Let me give it a try!”

“I like your spirit!”

“I’m rooting for you, Hotey!”

Kai booted up his Switch in TV mode and handed a Joy-Con to Kotobuki. She

opened the Time Trials mode with the determination and resolve of a soldier marching toward certain death. Kai and Jun turned their gazes to the TV in suspense.

What they saw was a Princess Peach who had never heard the word “drift” in her life and crashed into every Thwomp on the track. Her time was better left unsaid.

Kai and Jun immediately communicated through nervous glances.

Crap! Jun, I can't think of how we can possibly put enough of a handicap on to have an actual game!

What do we do, Kai? I don't want to bully Hotey!

Kotobuki shuddered as she gripped her Joy-Con. She was too emotionally unstable and too focused on what other people thought to not understand what those glances meant.

“I’m sorry... I suck, I’m sorry...”

“D-Don’t worry about it! The only score that matters in a game is whether you had fun!”

“...Right, and playing *Mario Kart* with me...wouldn’t be very fun for you two...”

“I-It would totally be fun! Your big sis Jun knows just how to play with a handicap!”

Even though she was being comforted on both fronts, Kotobuki still slumped her shoulders in dejection. Well, Kai wasn’t sure that Jun’s comment counted as comfort.

“What do we do, Kai?”

“You’re making *me* solve this?!”

“C’mon, you’re the man here, you can do it! Pwease, save me and Hotey!”

Jun broke out the flirty voice as soon as it suited her needs. He couldn’t deny

that he had to do something, though. After some thought, Kai came up with an idea.

“Oh yeah, let’s play a co-op game.”

A competitive game falls apart if the difference in skill level between its players is too wide. It just turns into a bullying session. But with cooperative games, if one person is inexperienced, then the other two can pick up the slack. If anything, it hypes people up and even deepens bonds. This was the real way for an experienced gamer to welcome a beginner.

“If we want co-op, then I guess *Tanks*?”

“Too complicated, so how about *Monster Hunter*?”

“I dunno, I think that’s pretty rough on newbies too...”

“Ah, yeah, can’t deny that...”

And so concludes the expert gamer’s guide to welcoming a beginner. Thank you for your support, please look forward to Kai Nakamura’s next work.

“Worry not, Nakamura. I believe it’s worth a try.” Kotobuki gave a heartening fist pump despite the fact that her face happened to be pale. Jun clenched her heart in pain as she went on about how precious she was.

Kai was a bit concerned, but he turned on his PS4 anyway. They were just trying it out, so he let Kotobuki use his character that had maxed-out equipment. Kai would deck the character out in full Arch-Tempered armor and have Kotobuki hunt the first (and weakest) boss you meet in the story, the low rank Great Jagras. He talked it over with Jun.

“The only problem is the weapon...”

Monster Hunter has a lot of different weapons from the sword and shield to gunlances. The weapon you choose greatly influences how you play the game. If one were to ask Kai, he’d say that using five different weapons made the game five times as fun. It was *that* deep, but that also made the question of what weapon to give Kotobuki all the more delicate. Having her wield an expert-oriented armament like a lance or a heavy bowgun was out of the question.

Kai and Jun reached their conclusions at the same moment.

“Yep, a beginner should use a great sword.”

“Yep, a beginner’s gotta use a sword and shield.”

For an instant, sparks flew from the gazes they shot each other.

“The core of *Monster Hunter* is finding the openings in a monster’s attacks and taking advantage of them. And a great sword is the lovely gentleman who’ll teach you that.”

“Excuse me? The fun of *Monster Hunter* is mashing buttons for those sick combos! There’s only one choice: sword and shield or dual blades!”

“That’s two choices! Anyway, Jun, this is why you never get good! You keep going in without a shred of patience! I’ve only got so many Lifepowders. How about you learn some great sword fundamentals?”

“Excuse me? You know that every magazine, strategy guide, and website ever made recommends that beginners use a sword and shield, right? Your default weapon is a sword and shield! It may as well be a canon OTP at this point!”

Kai and Jun’s argument was heating up, but...

“...My apologies, but may I ask that you not fight so gleefully over something I fail to understand?”

The way Kotobuki smiled while a fire raged in her eyes was a bit terrifying, so the two shut up.

“W-Well, it’s my character, so how about we go with a great sword?”

“That makes zero logical sense, but I don’t want Hotey getting mad, so sure.”

And so, they smoothly reached a mutual agreement. Kotobuki would use a great sword—the strongest one in the game, the Wyvern Ignition “Impact,” at that. They wanted her to experience this game with a battle she couldn’t possibly lose. They wanted her, if luck would have it, to maybe even see what it was that made the game so special. Those were Kai and Jun’s honest feelings. Yes, they wanted her to experience the thrill of boldly challenging a monster bigger than herself (even though she was guaranteed to win) with a weapon she forged herself (even though Kai gave her the strongest weapon in the game). They wanted her to have a taste of the primal rush that hacking and

slashing into a gigantic monster while dancing around its barrage of attacks could provide. Those were the hopes imbued in the controller they handed her.

“Here I go,” said Kotobuki. She gripped the pad with renewed motivation. The hunter she controlled wandered through the forest within the game. She was nervous at first, but she lightened up as she freely explored the world around her.

“The PS4’s graphics are certainly impressive. The jungle looks so realistic.”

“Do I merely have to follow this pretty light?”

“Ah, so I can harvest this large mushroom. I can’t say that color looks particularly appetizing, though.”

“I’m impressed that this hunter person can breathe underwater.”

Kotobuki’s comments came one after the other. Having a lot to say was a sign that she was enjoying herself. She wasn’t used to MH’s unique control scheme, so her hunter’s movements were awkward and she went off track plenty of times. Still, she was making her way ever closer to the Great Jagras.

Kai and Jun helped make her feel welcome; they agreed with her comments, cracked jokes, and gave her plenty of honest advice. Series veterans like them wouldn’t give a second thought to mushrooms growing in a forest. They’d march like a career soldier straight to the boss monster’s nest, where they’d hunt it, skin it, and click their tongues if they didn’t get a rare material. It was just a daily grind to them. But watching Kotobuki enjoy herself gave Kai a shot of nostalgia as he thought back to the excitement of his own early days.

But the picnic ended here.

Kotobuki’s hunter finally reached the boss monster. The Great Jagras looked like a cross between a frog and an alligator; it was creepy, but still somehow silly. It sauntered around the shrubbery, seemingly unaware of Kotobuki’s presence. But Kotobuki didn’t try to approach it. She just wandered around in the lower part of the screen.

“What might you be doing, Kotobuki?”

“I-I’m too scared to get close.”

“It’s just a game, so get in there and start slashing!”

“But I’m scared...”

It seemed that Kotobuki was the type to self-insert into the characters she plays. The type to say “ouch” whenever their character took a hit. People like that were out there.

“Don’t worry, Hotey. With armor like yours, that thing could chew you up and you’d barely take any damage. You’re not gonna die. Or would you like your big sis Jun to show you the ropes?”

“Th-There’s no need. Here I go.” Jun cooed and offered to throw a lifeline, which had the opposite effect and motivated Kotobuki to attack.

The Great Jagras still hadn’t noticed her. It just sat there with its butt facing the screen, barely moving at all. This was the most basic of quests, so its difficulty was low. Kotobuki’s hunter advanced ever closer, with movements as jerky as ever. And so her character swung the gigantic sword that was bigger than their body. It was a dramatic, striking image; ridiculous in reality, but possible in the world of a game. And once Kotobuki’s blade swung through its arc, it dramatically struck...the ground right next to the Great Jagras’s feet. Yep, this was a dramatic miss.

This warranted another conversation via nervous glances between Kai and Jun.

Crap! Jun, how did she miss something that doesn’t move?!

What do we do, Kai? This is what happened when my grandma tried playing this game on a whim!



Kotobuki's eyes rolled back in her head in shame after decoding those gestures. The Great Jagras naturally didn't overlook this attempt on its life, so Kotobuki's stock-still hunter was now being slammed by its assault.

"Kotobuki, you're getting hit! You're getting hit!"

"Hotey, you gotta run for it!"

"Uh, um, er, what do I do?"

Kotobuki's character sluggishly shifted left and right while holding an oversized weapon. The Great Jagras made swift pokes to punish her hesitation.

Great swords in *Monster Hunter* were known for dealing high damage with each individual strike, but they made your hunter as slow as a turtle once you drew them and assumed an offensive stance. As such, the proper technique was to make an attack upon drawing your sword and then sheathe it once you were done. Visually, it was fairly close to a quick-draw technique. Or, so went Kai's initial lecture...

"Kotobuki, you have to press the square button to sheathe your sword!"

"I'm doing that, but nothing is happening!"

The hunter on screen tried to sheathe their sword, but they were attacked by the Great Jagras and sent flying as the animation was canceled.

"You can't just mash the square button. You have to find an opening in the monster's attack to do it."

"Huh? What? Where is this opening?"

The hunter on screen tried to sheathe their sword again, but they were attacked by the Great Jagras and sent flying as the animation was cancelled. This left Kotobuki with her weapon constantly drawn, forcing her into a battle where she moved as slowly as a turtle. She was too slow in this state to even run away.

"Were great swords not the best choice for Kotobuki after all?"

"Told ya."

Even after getting elbowed by Jun, Kai could say nothing in his defense. To

make matters worse, a pack of Jagrases (grunt monsters that look like dog-sized lizards) came to torment Kotobuki as her hunter was now surrounded, taking bite attacks from all sides.

“Yikes, Hotey’s getting mindbroken.”

“P-Please don’t make such vile metaphors!”

“That’s sexual harassment, Jun!”

Jun gave a quick “my bad!” to Kotobuki and Kai’s complaints. But unlike people who could understand the meaning of words, the Jagrases did not wait. They enveloped Kotobuki(’s hunter) and continued their barrage of bites. The damage they dealt was almost zero thanks to the armor Kai had equipped, but it was *Monster Hunter* tradition to stun players after getting hit no matter how low the damage one received was. The tactic to avoid this was to use your dodge role and slip away, but that was a tall order for someone with as little of a knack for action games as Kotobuki. She just kept taking attacks forever, unable to respond.

“Yikes, they’re gonna make Hotey do an ahgao!”

“Th-This is not a porno!”

“That’s sexual harassment, Jun!”

Jun gave a quick “my bad!” to Kotobuki and Kai’s complaints.

But unlike people who could understand the meaning of words, the Jagrases did not stop their biting. They defiled Kotobuki(’s hunter) until there was nothing left...only a corpse. Kotobuki took a decked-out character and died on a two-star quest.

“...I think...I hate this game.” Kotobuki shivered as tears welled in her eyes.

“...I’m sorry, Capcom. Laugh at my failure of a skill all you like, I deserve it...”

Kai looked toward the heavens and offered a lamentation toward his favorite developer.

“I’m sorry... I’m a worthless human being... I beg you, leave this insect be and enjoy *Monster Hunter* by yourselves... I’m sorry for being born...”

With the foundation of her mental stability now thoroughly crumbled, Kotobuki curled up in the fetal position on the bed and muttered at the wall.

“Look at her, Kai! Do something about this! Give me my happy Hotey back!”

“Kotobuki was never yours to begin with!”

Kai and Jun had a bit of a spat in hushed voices in addition to their eye contact communication.

“Actually, wait, I think I just realized something.” Kai turned to his personal PS4 and his personal TV.

“What? ‘Cause I don’t care about your excuses!” Jun turned to her *own* personal PS4 and her own personal TV that were placed right next to Kai’s.

Yes, the two of them played the multiplayer modes of *Monster Hunter* and *WoT* using one TV and one PS4 per person. Jun had brought her own console over and even hijacked the Nakamuras’ Wi-Fi to surf the internet.

“If we wanted to play *Monster Hunter* with Kotobuki...wouldn’t we need a third setup?” He really should have noticed sooner. Definitely a “no duh” sort of moment.

“Oh, don’t worry, that’ll get solved within the week,” whispered Jun, undeterred.

“Huh?” responded Kai, baffled as to how she could refute that so readily. “Jun, what the heck do you mean?”

“I already ordered a PS4 and a TV for Hotey. They should get delivered by the weekend.”

“Why would you go that far?!”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Jun responded with no hesitation. “It’s only natural.”

“No part of that is natural!” Kai shot back with even less hesitation.

“It’s love! I’ll do whatever it takes to play with Hotey.”

“And I’m telling you that your love is too heavy! Cancel that order!” Kai was dumbfounded that she’d shell out a five-figure sum of yen just to treat her crush. “And aren’t you always whining about being broke? Where’d the sudden

bags of money come from? Did you sell a kidney?"

"Oh, I just asked my brothers reeeal nicely, tee hee!"

"So you're just making them do all the work!"

"Well, you know how generous my brothers are."

"Those terminal doters! I can't believe they'd plop down that much cash at the drop of a hat..."

"I just asked 'em for the favor of a lifetime, tee hee!"

"I bet it won't be the last, will it?" Kai replied. His sense of sanity couldn't keep up.

"Either way, Kai, does that even matter right now?"

"It sure does! I'm not letting you run away from your crime of making your brothers buy Kotobuki a PS4!"

"Well I'm not letting you run away from your crime of giving Hotey a nervous breakdown!"

"Okay, sorry!" Kai apologized and bowed on his hands and knees atop the bed. He began thinking about how he could start rebuilding Kotobuki's mental foundation. The quickest way he could come up with took him back to square one: find a game the three of them could actually enjoy together. But what game would Kotobuki most enjoy playing?

"Hmm...all the go-to party games I know are *Smash Bros* and other action-heavy games..."

Unfortunately, Kai was stumped. But an idea to resolve their dilemma came to him like a divine revelation.

"I've got it!"

"Okay, I'm all ears."

"We'll ask Royalteach for advice!"

"How about *you* stop making my brothers do all the work?"

Kai paid no mind to Jun's potshot. Right beside him was a girl in tears, so he'd

do whatever it took to help her.

Mr. Prince, aka Royalteach, was a gamer so hardcore that he earned even Kai's respect. He wasn't just a *Monster Hunter* Let's Player known online as jyunjyun1203 (shortened to JJ), he was a longtime expert in games from every genre and system under the sun. A youngster like Kai might not have the answer they needed, but Royalteach certainly would.

"Let's see..." Kai started typing on his phone. "My apologies for bothering you when you're certainly busy, but I have a question I wish to ask..."

Kai gave it a shot by sending several messages in the LINE group shared between the two of them and Jun. Not soon after, his messages were marked as read. That was a good sign; Royalteach was paying attention to his phone.

A good sign, but it didn't seem to lead to a response.

"Um, is Royalteach actually busy today?"

"Now that you mention it, I think he said his staff meeting would last a while..."

"Then tell me that beforehand!"

Well, that was bad timing. Kai couldn't blame Royalteach for leaving him on read if he was still on the clock.

"Apologies for the bother, I'll ask another time," typed Kai. But before he could hit send, a message from Jun popped up.

"Broyalty, pretty please?"

"Hmm, I recommend *Ultimate Chicken Horse*," responded Royalteach immediately.

Kai wished Royalteach had just answered in the first place, but either way, he got the info he needed. For that, he was grateful.

"But I've never heard of that one before..."

“Looks like it’s a Switch game.”

“1480 yen?! Damn, that’s cheap!”

The two of them did their research on their smartphones before Kai quickly purchased a digital copy. He might have called it cheap, but 1500 yen for a single party game still hurt. Then again, games had replay value, so it certainly beat out something like a karaoke trip for the price.

“Don’t sweat the price. We’re both treating her, so I’ll go dutch with you later.”

“Don’t call it a ‘treat.’”

“We’re both whaling for Hotey.”

“You’re making it worse!”

That was enough whispering for now, so Kai and Jun returned their voices to their normal volumes.

“Pardon, Kotobuki, but would you perhaps like to try *this* game? I’ve yet to try it myself, but it appears fun.”

“My bro said it’s super good!”

The two invited her to play with full, warm smiles.

“...My apologies for causing you concern.” Kotobuki still sounded a bit glum, but she was mature enough to not spend all night pouting and throwing a tantrum. Each person took a Joy-Con separated from the main console and played while referencing the online manual.

Ultimate Chicken Horse was a party platform game for up to four players. You could play as either a chicken, a horse, a raccoon, or a sheep. The designs for the critters were all charming, but still somewhat goofy, making them a hit with girls who love cute things. The gameplay was simple: players raced each other to the goal within a stage small enough to fit on one screen, making it a good fit for Kotobuki.

The twist was that after each round, every player could choose one obstacle, trap, or platform to add to the level. Then the race began anew, with the

difficulty of reaching the goal rapidly rising each round. Eventually, players wound up with a stage so unfairly hard you'd think they were only beatable in a TAS. It puts players in the dilemma where they need to block their opponents from reaching the goal, but can't score any points if they themselves can't reach it either. You could say that the key to victory was to strategically place objects to create a difficulty that you could overcome but your opponents couldn't. But as a party game where the best-laid plans of chickens and horses clashed, things often went awry. In the end, it was about being a nuisance to other players while occasionally making it to the goal through sheer dumb luck; it was an undeniably silly game, but in a good way.

"Quit it, Jun! Pointing a crossbow at that angle is just cruel! I'll die!"

"I don't wanna hear it from the guy who put a chainsaw right in front of the goal!"

"You two are monsters. This stage descends ever further into madness..."

"Bwa ha ha, all according to plan. I have the most points, so if none of you can reach the goal, I will be crowned the victor!"

"My, Miyakawa, did you hear what I heard? If we cooperate and create a level we can complete, we can stage a comeback ourselves!"

"Well, how could I say no to my dear Hotey?"

"My thanks for your placement of the staircase. Now I can avoid the chainsaw."

"...So you say, Kotobuki, but might I ask why you elected to place spikes on said staircase?"

"Because I must exact my vengeance on Miyakawa after being eaten alive by that mysterious flower of hers."

"Waahh, I'm sowwy, Hotey... I jusht wanted to kill Kaaaaai..."

If nothing else, it was a lively experience. There was so much unfair nonsense that they could only laugh at it. Once they looked at their trap-laden level, Kai

started shouting.

“Okay, quit screwing around! We can’t even get to the goal anymore!”

“Forget that! Kai, you don’t get to blame us when you put traps everywhere!”

They all roared with laughter.

“Miyakawa,” asked Kotobuki in response to Jun’s brutal trap placement, “can you even reach the goal through these?”

“No way in hell!”

They all roared with laughter.

“Hey!” yelled Jun after getting ensnared by her own trick. “Who’s the jerk who put a trap in a sneaky spot like this?!”

“Told ya. Glad you’re getting a taste of your own medicine.”

They all roared with laughter. They laughed when they triggered their own traps. They laughed harder when their opponents did. They laughed when they worked together only to betray their partner moments later. They laughed even when they *were* the betrayed partner. Their laughter knew no limits. Even the smug and reserved Kotobuki found herself bursting into laughter every time she opened her mouth. Everyone enjoyed it together because the game was both absurd and absurdly difficult; one’s skill at action games had almost no effect on the outcome.

Kai was right to trust Royalteach. *This* was how a genius player welcomed a beginner into the fold.



“Whew, what a day...”

Kotobuki, now back in her room on her bed, buried her face in the pillow and talked to herself. She was fresh out of a hot bath and the cold mattress felt nice through the sheets. Now that she was completely drained, she reflected on everything that happened after school.

It was her first time going over to Kai’s house and she played her heart out.

Together with Jun, the three of them played games and watched some recorded anime. The Nakamuras even fed her dinner. Like Kai said, his family was very laid-back; they welcomed Kotobuki with all smiles to help her break out of her shy shell. They were all a warm, pleasant bunch. Since Kotobuki stayed over so late, Kai's mom even drove her all the way home.

She'd be lying if she said she didn't have fun. She spent the whole night with the boy she liked, after all. But she couldn't pretend that she was particularly reassured now that it was all over.

Uuuuugh, jeeez, what's with them? Why are they so friendlyyyyyy...

Kotobuki groaned as she pulled out her smartphone and looked again at the photo of the three of them sitting together. She created a copy where she cropped out the part with Jun, but she kept the original just in case. When Jun took that photo, she didn't think twice about clinging to Kai, and closely at that. It made Kotobuki's competitive spirit flare up enough to endure the embarrassment and cling to Kai as well.

And what was Kai's reaction?

It's true what they say. A picture's worth a thousand words. That's what makes them scary...

Kotobuki glared at her phone screen in displeasure. In the photo, Kai had a bashful look on his face as she and Jun clung to his arms. Next, she looked lower to analyze his body language. His right side was tensed in anxiety as she clung to him, while his left side that Jun clung to looked completely relaxed.

Ugggh, why does she get such different treatment? Nakamura, you jeeeeerker! Kotobuki buried her face in her pillow once again and kicked her legs up and down.

On further reflection, maybe the self-consciousness Kai showed towards her was proof that he viewed her as the romantic interest of the two. Wouldn't that make her the winner? Could she call the race so easily? Could she say for certain that he didn't view Jun romantically?

She spent all night observing them, but Kotobuki still couldn't say for sure. It

wasn't just the incident with the photo; every time Kai and Jun needed to have a conversation Kotobuki couldn't hear, they made eye contact. They managed to communicate with just their eyes as if it were the simplest thing in the world. That was hard to pull off even with family members you've lived with for years, but did these two really reach that level after just a year of friendship?

Gaaaaah, uuuuugh, I'm jealoooooous. I wanna do that with Nakamuraaaaaaaaaa! She hugged her pillow close (since she couldn't hug a certain someone at the moment) and wriggled on her bed.

The real kicker happened after they had finished gaming. Since they were tired and needed a break, it was only natural for them to switch to watching anime. The three of them—Kotobuki, Kai, and Jun, in that order—sat on the edge of the bed. And right when the opening started, Kotobuki saw something outrageous: Jun suddenly lay down, with her head right on Kai's lap! And Kai treated this act of pure anarchy as perfectly natural!

It was a lap pillow! A lap pillow! Who does that?! And right in front of someone else?! Does that mean she wasn't even aware that she was showing off?! Is she all, 'We're always like this, what's the big deal'?! Aaaaaargh, jeeeeeez, that's beyond confidence, that's being cocky!

Kotobuki gripped her skull and writhed around on top of her bed.

Are they seriously not dating?! They've gotta be kidding! They're joined at the freakin' hip! I bet they're spending those five days a week flirting! I bet they're going on stay-in dates!

Kotobuki sat up and whacked her pillow around out of frustration, but she soon settled down. She lay spread-eagled on her bed as she caught her breath. Then, she looked at her smartphone once again. At the photo of the two of them that she set as her lock screen. There was a part of Jun's arm that she couldn't cut out, but beggars couldn't be choosers. She liked it. But it would only stay as her lock screen for tonight; by tomorrow, she would change it to some other picture. It'd be too embarrassing if anyone saw.

"I'm just a garbage insect," sighed Kotobuki. She never had any confidence in her physical strength, but her mental strength was absolutely nonexistent.

And despite all that...I still don't want to give up on Nakamura. I don't want to

back off just because I've got a tough rival.

As she stared at the ceiling, Kotobuki understood.

This was what it was like to love someone.

The realization made her so embarrassed that she turned beet-red, buried her face in her pillow, and rolled around like mad. She contorted her body and kicked against her mattress.

After a while, she started thinking anew. She reconsidered the evidence concerning Kai and Jun's relationship. Could it be that they simply didn't realize they were basically an item? Or could it be that Jun had realized it and was just good at hiding it? Or maybe they actually *were* just friends who were so close that they looked like lovers?

There was one thing she did know. Whether the feelings between them were that of friendship or romance, Kai and Jun had a relationship that was far from ordinary. As long as he had Jun, Kai wouldn't be wooed by Kotobuki. Which meant that if nothing changed, her feelings wouldn't bear fruit. Absolutely not.

"Then...what should I..."

Episode 005: Hotey the Emotional Disaster Wants Attention

It was the weekend. Specifically, it was Saturday. And it was a day Kai was scheduled for work. As a weekend shift, it was a full eight hours of labor; he clocked in at 1 p.m., paused for an hour-long meal break in the middle, and closed up shop at 10 p.m. He also got two fifteen-minute paid breaks at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m.

It was during this second break that the incident occurred.

“Hm? Kotobuki?”

When Kai entered the kitchen in the back (that doubled as a break room), he found Kotobuki sitting alone.

She didn’t have a shift today, and her choice of clothing was...curious. She wore a camisole that left her shoulders boldly exposed and a tiny miniskirt (that Jun would probably wear without a second thought). Sure, summer might have been around the corner, but this seemed far more aggressive than anything Kotobuki would ever choose to wear.

“Ah, did you perhaps forget what day you were supposed to work?” Kai hid his suspicion by playing it off as a joke.

“No, I waited here because I have business with you.”

Kotobuki answered him immediately with a rather firm tone. No, not just her tone—the posture with which she planted herself at the four-person table exuded the same aura. Even her expression seemed like she’d been deep in thought, but surely that was Kai’s imagination. He considered greeting her with some sort of chit-chat, but it didn’t feel appropriate.

“By all means,” said Kai gently. He was worried about Kotobuki, but he didn’t want to make *her* worry too. He strode forward to sit across from her, but Kotobuki sprung up a moment sooner and walked right up to his face, leaving maybe a fist’s distance between them.

Something was definitely off. Kai's eyes widened in surprise as he quickly took stock of his surroundings. The manager and the rest of his coworkers were all doing their jobs, so nobody else would be coming to the break room for the remainder of his time off. He didn't have to worry about anyone walking in on them. It was safe to assume that Kotobuki chose to wait for him here, at this moment, because she also knew they'd be alone.

"O-Once again, may I ask what your concern is?" stammered Kai. His voice cracked, betraying his attempts at hiding his surprise. With Kotobuki so close, her exposed neck and collarbone, as well as the fair skin that coated her shoulders, entered his field of vision whether he wanted them to or not. It was bad for his heart.

Kotobuki, however, didn't answer immediately. She was close enough for her breath to reach him, but short enough that she had to look up to see his face. She stared with almost fearsome intensity. Her face was pale; she had to be many times more nervous than Kai was. But eventually, with her voice and lips trembling, she answered.

"Make me your lover...Kai."

She threw down the gauntlet with unbelievable bluntness. Kai had braced himself for whatever would come next and still got the wind knocked out of him. Both Kotobuki's forceful re-confession and the fact that she called him by his first name gave his heart a sugar-sweet sucker punch. Unfortunately, this was not the time to swoon.

"W-Wait a moment, Kotobuki. Did we not agree to a trial period?"

"I cannot wait. Please, give me an answer now." Kotobuki, the emotional disaster, looked at him without averting her gaze once. It spoke to just how much determination she came here with, as well as the reason for her uncharacteristically suggestive outfit.

"What's gotten into you?" Kai couldn't tell. What change of heart had Kotobuki gone through? Why did she feel so rushed?

Kotobuki didn't answer. She only pressured him further.

“Please, choose me instead of Miyakawa.”

“...”

Another shock ran through Kai’s heart, but this one came with a tinge of pain. He knew he had to bear it and give her an answer, but his voice wouldn’t come out so quickly.

To reiterate, Jun was not his girlfriend, so he could easily say that she was asking the wrong question...but Kotobuki wouldn’t take that for an answer. Kai could tell what question she was *really* asking.

She wanted him to stop hanging out with Jun, regardless if she was a lover to him or just a friend. Kotobuki demanded that his eyes would be only for her in no uncertain terms.

So...it’s really gonna come to this? Is this just how women think? Kai wasn’t a psychic himself, but he could tell that Reina’s prediction had come true. Just as she warned him, the time when he’d have to choose between Jun or Kotobuki had arrived. Kotobuki said she wanted to hang out with the two of them together in the future so Kai had hoped he was out of the woods, but it seemed he was just being naive.

“...I’m sorry.” Kai gritted his teeth through the bitterness and pain to give Kotobuki his answer.

The friendship Kai had with Jun was irreplaceable to him. He couldn’t become Kotobuki’s lover if it meant throwing that away. Even if it hurt her, he couldn’t lie about his feelings.

That was the firm answer he *wanted* to give, but he couldn’t. Kotobuki, a veteran in reading peoples’ body language, quickly blocked him from doing so. Before he could state the obvious, his mouth was covered.

With Kotobuki’s lips.

Kotobuki had kissed him.

His mind blanked out. He got goosebumps. This was the first kiss of Kai's life. And probably Kotobuki's too. It was an unpredictable sneak attack, one that he had no way to dodge.



Kotobuki closed her eyes and stood on her tiptoes to offer her lips to Kai. The soft sensation was forced upon him. Manga and the like usually compared the texture to marshmallows, but the real thing was totally different. In reality, kisses were far softer; their character was much too gentle and slippery to be considered elastic. If any marshmallow were this sensual on the lips, they'd probably sell like hotcakes.

...Wait, I gotta focus here!

The haze cleared from his mind and Kai suddenly came to his senses. He jerked his head back to break free from Kotobuki's kiss, but Kotobuki leaned forward even further to chase him. He tried to grab her shoulders and gently push her away; he couldn't just shove a girl off, of course. Kai expected her exposed skin to be soft, but he was surprised at just how dainty she was, at just how different men and women were.

Well, maybe Kotobuki was just an outlier. He'd gotten used to physical contact from Jun and he didn't remember her feeling so fragile. That's why he put extra care into the level of force he used as he carefully pushed Kotobuki away.

"...Do you hate me?"

"I don't hate you."

"But you don't love me, do you?"

"I don't want to play semantics. Not now." It'd just make him sad.

"If you made me your lover, I could kiss you like that every day."

"...Stop it, okay?"

"If you wish, Kai, I could even let you go further..."

"Please stop. I'm begging you."

Kai shook his head. He didn't trust his ability to give any explanation, no matter how simplified, so he just kept shaking his head again and again and again.

"I'm happy you feel that way about me, really..." Kai didn't have the slightest

intention of blaming or scolding Kotobuki. She was a bashful kid; it wasn't hard to imagine that she must have given it a lot of thought to do something so bold. "But if this is the way you go about it, I won't even be able to see you anymore."

No matter how many kisses Kotobuki drenched him in, Kai could never respond to her feelings. Sure, he had a libido of his own, but only his body would be experiencing that pleasure, not his heart. If Kotobuki continued to chase him even after it was clear that they wouldn't become lovers, then Kai would have only one responsible option: to reject her completely. To never see her again. It would just be too much sorrow. Far more than he could bear.

But would Kotobuki understand that? As he gripped her dainty shoulders, Kai looked at her expression. He couldn't see anything, though; she hung her head as though she couldn't bear to look at him any longer. All his eyes could capture were the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Kotobuki!"

"...I'm sorry, Nakamura." Kotobuki spun around and swatted Kai's hands back. She departed through the break room door as though running away.

"Kotobuki, wait!"

"I'll call you later! Good luck with work!"

Kotobuki slammed the door shut behind her. Kai hesitated, unsure of whether he should go after her or leave her be, but he eventually chose the latter. It wasn't like he could just leave his job on the spot, and Kotobuki would probably be long gone by the time he explained the situation to his manager. He just had to trust that she'd keep her word about calling him later.

"Dammit..."

Kai found himself cursing. Kotobuki's figure as she bolted out of the break room seemed smaller than he'd ever seen her before. He was filled with regret; if he were more mature, maybe he could have defused the situation without making Kotobuki cry.

But for the person he was now, this was the best Kai could do. If Reina hadn't given him that warning—that is, if he hadn't reconsidered just how important Jun's friendship was to him—that sudden kiss might have caused him to give in

to the urges of a typical pubescent boy. With that possibility in mind, Kai at least had to commend himself for standing firm.

“Aaaaaaaaagh, this suuuuuuuucks!” sighed Kai pathetically. He got kissed by a beautiful girl like Kotobuki and didn’t feel the slightest bit of joy from it. And that was his first time too. He’d always seen people in manga wonder about what kisses tasted like, but now that he’d experienced one, he had to say that they didn’t have much of a flavor at all.

However, his first kiss had quite the nasty aftertaste.



Kai’s mood still hadn’t recovered by the next day. If anything, it’d gotten even worse.

After lunch, Kai went right back to his room and checked his smartphone. He looked at a LINE chat with him and Kotobuki.

“Did you view today’s *Demon Slayer*?”

That was the message Kai sent at 12:04 a.m. Kotobuki didn’t text him no matter how long he waited, so he had tried to start a conversation first. Kotobuki’s social anxiety wasn’t anything new, so he figured she’d been worrying about it the whole time. Maybe she really regretted what happened. Maybe she couldn’t work up the courage to break the ice. Kai wanted to be considerate, so he went first and acted as though nothing happened. He hit the send button in the hopes that Kotobuki would respond just like her old self.

But he didn’t even get a read receipt.

[12:31] “Are you free tomorrow? I have plans with Jun. Would you like to join?”

[12:36] “Jun would certainly love to see you too.”

[12:39] “Including myself, of course!”

[1:46] “If you’re busy tomorrow, you can just tell me when you’re available.”

[3:00] “Sorry, I’m heading to bed for the night.”

[9:12] “Good morning.”

[10:01] “I don’t mean to be a bother, but I hope you can respond.”

So went the many messages Kai sent to her, but it was now the afternoon and not a single one had been read. He was being completely ignored.

What’s she thinking?

Kai made up his mind and tried calling her, but to no avail. There was no sign that she’d pick up.

Is she that torn up about it? Maybe she’s having a tough time moving on...

Kai could theorize, but it wouldn’t lead to an answer. If she never responded, then he’d never know. But as he kept racking his brain, one terrifying thought crossed his mind.

There’s no way that she’s trying to cut off contact...right?

If she were, then Kai couldn’t blame her. He chose his friendship with Jun over her. It would only be natural for her to be so deeply hurt that the bridge between them was forever burned. Sure, maybe he was jumping to conclusions. But if he wasn’t...

His thoughts spiraled out of control. He at least wanted to see her face.

We have the same shift next week, so sure, I’ll see her there...

But would he have to agonize over this fear until then? No, even that was optimistic; Kotobuki could always skip work, if not quit altogether...

“Man, this is rough...”

Kai tossed away his smartphone and sighed. Could he have spared himself from this pain if they’d stayed friends the whole time? Would he have been better off if he’d just pretended not to notice Kotobuki’s feelings? Should those dense protagonists you see in fiction actually be the model for dealing with romantic relationships?

He couldn’t come to an answer, and time soon ran out. The doorbell rang, meaning that Jun was here. He had to snap out of it; Jun didn’t know a thing, so he didn’t want his glum face to give her a hint.

“Good aftersmooch!”

Jun showed up as happy as a clam. Her eyes darted around Kai’s room as soon as she entered it.

“Looking for something?”

“Yeah, Hotey. Y’know, in case she was here.”

“Well, she’s not. Trust me, I’d tell you if she were.”

“But what if you wanted to surprise me?”

“Fine, I’ll keep it in mind for your birthday. Hope you can wait until December.”

“You remembered my birthday? Is this love?!”

“No, it’s your brother.”

The hardcore gamer that Kai so deeply admired, jyunjyun1203, proudly displayed Jun’s birthday in the last four digits of his online handle.

“I can’t wait until December,” whined Jun as she sat on the bed. “I wanna play with Hotey now!”

“Got it, soon.” Kai did his best to play it cool. He didn’t tell Jun that she might not see her ever again.

“How soon is soon? Five minutes?”

“That’s too soon.”

“Then, tomorrow?”

“Do I have to remind you that Kotobuki has a life of her own?”

“Oh well, guess I’ll settle for hanging with you.”

“It’s an honor and a privilege.”

Jun grabbed the remote and turned on the two TVs as she and Kai traded friendly jabs. As though through psychic communication, Kai grabbed two PS4 controllers—not Switch controllers—and handed one to Jun.

“Shall we play *Tanks*? Shall we play *Warships*? Or perhaps...”

“Let’s start with *Monster Hunter*!”

“Figures.”

The spark of *Iceborne* had rekindled their passion for the series. Their copies of *World* hadn’t left their consoles. Still, they’d grown used to this game after playing it to death, so it was less a session of serious hunting and more of a chance to chat while mashing some buttons.

“Jun, you see *Demon Slayer*?”

“Not yet, but I recorded it.”

“That udon scene was hilarious!”

“No spoilers!”

“You already read through the manga!”

“But now I can’t cry with joy that the udon scene made it into the anime!”

“...Actually, I apologize.”

“Glad you understand.”

“Well, are you still behind on *We Never Learn*?”

“Yep. I spent last night at Reina’s for a sleepover.”

“Wow. Tons of fun.”

“It *was* a ton of fun! Too bad we had to go to sleep early since Reina had work this morning.”

“Going pro sounds tough. Feels like she’s lost pretty much all of her Sundays.”

“Anyway, that’s why I got to do the walk of shame this morning.”

“Wow, Myaakawa’s such an adult that she’s not even ashamed of it. How, dare I say, *lewd*.”

“Heh, if you want lewd, you should’ve seen the underwear set Nocchi was wearing.”

Jun giggled teasingly. Incidentally, Nocchi was a friend of Jun’s, a member of Reina’s circle of popular girls, the ace spiker on the volleyball team, and also a tall, sexy girl with big boobs and a healthy suntan.

“...”

“Ooh, did you imagine it? Didja?”

“Jun, that’s just cruel! A boy’s pure heart is not your toy to play with! Jerk!”

“You know, I snapped a picture. Maybe I’ll show you if you can guess the color.”

“For real? You better take that back, you don’t want me getting serious.” Kai was a man who’d take on any challenge for the right prize.

“For real, for real. Okay, you got ten seconds, and...go!”

“Chestnut!”

“Ugh... You’re actually right... I could’ve sworn you’d say black. I’m legit kinda creeped out...”

“It wouldn’t be a quiz if the answer were that obvious. I’m not falling for a trick question!”

“I’m creeped out that you put thought into this.”

“All right, hand over the goods, pronto.”

The man who’d take on any challenge now demanded the right prize. They had just hit the point in their monster tracking where the game was switching areas, so taking a peek at a smartphone wouldn’t hinder their hunt.

“Fine,” said Jun, pursing her lips. “A promise is a promise.”

She operated her controller with one hand and unlocked her phone with the other. She then begrudgingly pointed her phone’s screen at Kai.

Nocchi in her underwear Nocchi in her underwear Nocchi in her underwear Nocchi in her underwear Nocchi in her underweeeeeear...

Kai gulped before glancing sideways to bask in the full glory of the lewd, dark brown lingerie...that was laid neatly on the floor. Of course, Nocchi was, er, nowhere to be seen.

“You tricked me! You treated a boy’s pure heart as your plaything!”

“I didn’t lie, and I kept my end of the bargain! *You’re* the one who got the

wrong idea. Oh, my poor little Kai, you've gotta learn to get your mind out of the gutter."

"I'm suing you for false advertising!"

"Go ahead and try. We both know you still got turned on."

"Gulp."

Kai grimaced as Jun hit the nail on the head. Even a simple photo of a bra and some panties turned into something far more powerful when you knew that a friend was wearing them. It was *hot*.

"Pervert! Perv alert! You're going to horny jail!"

"Look, all men are equally perverted. It's true!"

Kai's voice screeched as he attempted to defend himself from Jun's teasing.

The two laughed boisterously as they continued both their game and their foolish banter. This casual yet cherished moment was a panacea for Kai's weary heart. Maybe he really was a child, or maybe he was just not an adult. But he still felt the same way, even after all this: a friend was better than a lover. Way better.

He'd be sad if he never saw Kotobuki again, but he had no regrets over choosing his friendship with Jun. Of that, he was certain.



With their hunt concluded, the two looked over their rewards screens. Kai casually checked over the materials he was randomly assigned with neither joy nor a clicking of his tongue, when suddenly...

"Hey, Kai?" asked Jun, not breaking her gaze from her screen.

"Hm?" responded Kai as he continued moving his controller. "What's up?"

"Did...something happen?"

Jun's voice was nonchalant and she didn't look away from her TV, but she cut right to the chase. This time, Kai couldn't answer right away. His only reaction was the halting of his fingers. But Jun took his hesitation as her cue to press the issue.

“Did something happen between you and Hotey?”

She really was a sharp girl. The way she kept her eyes on the screen and her tone casual was simply a show of good faith. The former signaled that she was considerate enough not to pry into his reaction, and the latter implied that she didn't intend to blame him.

There's no getting past her, groaned Kai to himself.

“...What makes you think that?”

“Normally you'd be getting pissed and saying stuff like 'There's no point in beating Kulve Taroth without breaking the horns' or 'This quest was basically a failure.'”

“Well excuse me for wanting to be efficient!”

“Either way, you're way less focused than normal, so I figured something happened.”

“...Even if something did, what makes you think it's got anything to do with Kotobuki?”

“Because when I asked about Hotey, you dodged the question and said it'd be soon. Normally, you'd be the one to take it a step further and ask when.”

“That's all you need to base it off of? What are you, psychic?!”

Kai was honestly shocked. But Jun continued.

“Yeah, that's all I need,” said Jun with a smile. She had finally put her controller to the side and turned to face Kai. “I don't need to read your mind. Friends just know these things.”

“There you go with the cringe again,” said Kai. He meant that to be a jab, but he was really just hiding his own embarrassment at being read like a book. If that wasn't embarrassing enough, she scooted up next to him to boot. He wished she wouldn't—she smelled too nice.

“All right, perp, time to come clean. Did you get in a fight with Hotey?”

“Hold up, is this suddenly a crime now?”

“Yeah, and yer lookin' at life in the slammer!”

Jun balanced her antagonizing interrogation by rubbing her shoulder and cheek against Kai. For the sake of Kotobuki's privacy, he couldn't give too many details about what had happened. And Jun didn't dig for every bit of dirt there was, instead choosing to wrap her arm around Kai's neck and pull him in. Kai didn't resist; he shifted his position to let his face press against Jun's.

"Say cheese for the flirty selfie!" shouted Jun as she suddenly whipped out her smartphone.

"Wait, what're you doing?! I've got a bad feeling about this..."

"And sent to Broyalty!"

"Oh god no stop he's gonna kill me!"

"C'mon, don't sweat it."

Kai feared for his life, but there was no use crying over spilled milk. A message that was sent couldn't be recalled. And sure enough, the smartphone in Kai's pocket started vibrating just three seconds later. He was getting a call. Kai, his body trembling just as strongly, checked the screen to be certain. It was from Royalteach. He considered pretending not to notice, but putting this off was definitely going to bite him much harder later on.

"H-Hello," answered Kai into the receiver, fully expecting to get chewed out.

"I swear...Jun just never grows up. She must be a handful, no?"

Kai didn't expect what came through over the speaker. Royalteach was probably mad given the lack of a greeting and the hushed voice he spoke with, but it didn't sound like he was directing it at Kai. Kai was so stunned that he didn't respond right away.

"She's a handful, right?!"

"Oh, right! Yeah, innocence sure can be a handful!"

"Glad you agree. Now, wouldn't you *also* agree that it's your responsibility to be the reasonable adult around her?"

"I admit that I'm very much still a child, but I highly value responsibility! This photo is merely a symbol of friendship and absolutely nothing more!"

“Good to hear. Don’t make me regret placing my trust in you.”

And with that, Royalteach hung up.

“Told ya,” said Jun cheerfully. “Totally fine. Broyalty accepted our friendship.”

“That was bad for my heart. Please don’t put me through that again.”

Kai was going to complain no matter what Jun’s defense was, but he wasn’t so dense as to question the fact that Royalteach did acknowledge their friendship.

Royalteach was a terminal doter towards his sister, so he didn’t accept Jun and Kai’s friendship at first. He stayed firm when he said, “No inappropriate cavorting!” and, “Never flirt with Jun again!”

It took Kai getting fed up, barging into the Miyakawa household, giving Royalteach a piece of his mind, and then challenging him to a *Monster Hunter* duel to get him to let the two hang out again—not that Kai quite understood how he managed that change of heart.

Nowadays, Kai and Royalteach were close enough to play games together when time allowed for it.

Kai suddenly remembered that whole sequence of events. Jun had made him remember.

“You know,” whispered Jun as she tensed her arm around Kai’s neck and pulled him in closer, “I was just acting tough when I told you not to come to my house back then. I really was happy when you showed up. Really...really happy.”

Jun expressed as much gratitude as her words would allow. But Kai picked up on the rest of what she was trying to say; specifically, the encouragement in those words. That if he was so shaken up by what happened, he should just go to Kotobuki himself. Don’t think, just barge in. That was the Kai Nakamura she knew. That was the boy she was cheering on!

“...I’m the one who ought to be thanking you, Jun.” Kai felt the weight of his

gratitude in every word...before quickly shifting to an apology. "Sorry, but I gotta go!"

It was a shame; Jun had made plans and come all the way here to hang out, but he had to barge in on Kotobuki's place. Or so Kai meant to say, but Jun didn't let him repeat the obvious.

"Sorry Kai, I just remembered something I have to do too!"

Jun gave Kai a pat on the shoulder with the arm she had around him before suddenly standing up.

"Huh? What thing?"

"I'm going shopping with Reina today," said Jun as she wildly waved her hands about and breezily made her exit.

Liar, thought Kai. You just said Reina was working.

He wasn't so tactless as to say that aloud, of course. He just became ever more grateful of how considerate his friend was.

As Jun left, though, she peeked through the slightly ajar door and made one plea.

"I can't wait until December, though. I wanna play with Hotey now!"

"Gotcha. I'll talk it over with Kotobuki and make some plans."

Kai let Jun know that he heard her loud and clear. After his best friend gave him the push he needed and cleared the path to boot, he couldn't let her go with a mere thank you. He had to give her the same encouragement she gave him.

Episode 006: Agony of the Shut-In Cosplayer

Kai knew roughly where Kotobuki's house was; his mom just so happened to drive Kotobuki there when she stayed over late. "Hotei" was also a pretty uncommon last name, and since there didn't appear to be many family-owned dressmaking shops these days, it came up pretty quickly in an internet search once he narrowed down the general area.

It took about thirty minutes of pedaling like mad to get there. Kai found himself in an old shopping plaza with plenty of stores with their shutters still down. And there, on a street corner, was a building labeled "Hotei Dressmaking."

It seemed a good deal fancier than the obviously dated buildings that surrounded it; the colors on its sign weren't faded, the walls were all glass, and the lights inside were still on. But instead of looking like an impersonal, gaudy shop from the big city, it had a friendly feel to it. Despite the store's small size, it didn't seem particularly cramped from the outside looking in; maybe they purposely kept stock low, which left quite a bit of breathing room between the dresses hung for sale.

...Okay, here I go. Kai readied his gift box of sweets and entered the store.

"G-Good afternoon!"

"Welcome," came a warm greeting from a woman emerging from the back of the store. She seemed to be maybe in her mid-thirties and looked like a grown-up Kotobuki with brown-dyed hair.

Kotobuki said her only siblings were brothers, recalled Kai. That means this person isn't a much older sister, right? This is probably her mom, right? But she seems so young...

Kai wasn't as much of a wallflower as Kotobuki, but he couldn't pretend he was a social butterfly. He nervously corrected her misunderstanding.

"My apologies, but I'm not a customer. I'm here to see Kotobuki—"

“Oh! Are you that Kai boy I’ve heard so much about?”

The woman figured out Kai’s name before he had the chance to say it. It seemed like being intuitive ran in the family.

“Ah, yes, that’s me. My name is Kai Nakamura.”

“Knew it. There’s no other boy who’d come over to visit her.” Mrs. Hotei cackled with a smile that seemed just a little too shameless to be called teasing.

But their personalities couldn’t be more different, noted Kai. Her bluntness is like the polar opposite of Kotobuki...

Then again, maybe that was a given for someone who chose to work in customer service, especially as the owner of a one-of-a-kind store. Now that he had put the pieces together, Kai offered his gift box to Kotobuki’s mother.

“Er, it might not be much, but...”

“Oh my! Why, thank you. Good ol’ Kai, just as dependable and considerate as I’ve heard.”

“Oh no, I’m really nothing much...” Kai couldn’t bring himself to say that he only learned from Kotobuki’s example of bringing a gift to his own home and that he’d surely have come empty-handed otherwise. “But, er, what does Kotobuki typically say about me?”

“Only every compliment in the dictionary!”

“I-I don’t know what to say...” Kotobuki’s respect was certainly heavy.

“Anyway, c’mon in. She’s in her room.” Mrs. Hotei welcomed Kai in with an easygoing laugh. It was a far cry from being met by Jun’s brother, a schoolteacher, who once assumed a battle pose to block his path.

Either way, Kai followed Mrs. Hotei’s lead to the back. His stomach tied itself in a knot out of his growing nervousness. What kind of face should he show to Kotobuki after she refused to respond? Would she even let him show his face when he barged in unannounced? There was no shortage of things for him to worry about, but he couldn’t turn back after coming this far.

A door in the back of the shop led to a warehouse area used to organize dressmaking tools, fabrics, and completed garments. There was also a sewing

room, an office, and other rooms down the hall. The second and third floors made up the living space for the Hotei family; the building was what was known as a shop house. Kotobuki's room was on the third floor.

"Heads up, Kotobuki, your dear lil' Kai's come to visit."

Mr. Hotei opened the door wide after just two knocks. She left Kai with no time to object to her use of the word "dear," and nowhere near enough time to prepare himself to meet his coworker for the first time after such an awkward situation.

Kai faced Kotobuki with no preparation, and his jaw fell to the floor at the absolutely bizarre sight he was faced with.

Kotobuki was posing in front of a full-length mirror. Her hair was uncharacteristically styled into pigtails. Her body was covered by a white, skintight minidress and accessorized by a lone blue ribbon that ran under her breasts before being tied into a bow by her bicep. To put the clues together, she was cosplaying as Hestia from *Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?*



Why are you wearing...that? Kai was too stunned to put his thoughts into speech.

“Nakamura...what are you doing here?”

Kotobuki froze in a classic Hestia pose that featured a wink and a thumbs-up. And the next moment...

“Eeeeeeeek! Mom, why didn’t you knock?!”

“I did, though?”

“Well, don’t open the door until I tell you to!”

“My oh my, they grow up so fast. Well, don’t forget whose roof you’re under!”

Kotobuki protested with tears in her eyes, but Mrs. Hotei just cackled and fanned the flames. Kai found the dynamic somewhat entertaining. Not that he’d dare let that thought leave his lips.

“Anyway, I’ve got to attend to my shop, so you two can take your sweet old time now.”

“Thank you for showing me the way!”

“I should be thanking you! My little girl can be a handful, but take good care of her!”

Kai bowed to Mrs. Hotei as she shamelessly walked down the stairs, leaving her daughter emotionally scarred. After that, he turned to Kotobuki from the hall.

“Uh...may I come in? Or would you prefer I wait outside while you change?”

“Well, it’s not like it even matters anymore, so sure, come on in!”

Kotobuki screamed through the tears as though she’d completely given up. Kai was relieved to see that she was the same flustered Kotobuki he always knew. Nothing about her was out of the ordinary...besides the cosplay.



Kotobuki had an average-sized room, about ten square meters. This was Kai’s

first time seeing the inside of a girl's bedroom; he had been over Jun's house before, but he didn't dare enter her room while under Royalteach's stern watch.

Every spot the eye could see, from the walls to the ceiling, was covered in edge-to-edge anime posters. As such, it was far from a bland room, but it was almost devoid of anything of substance; her bookshelf was small and wasn't decorated with figures or any kind of anime merchandise.

There wasn't even anything typically girly there, like stuffed animals (though Kai might just be following stereotypes here). On the other hand, that made the lavish, yet rather aged vanity stick out all the more. It was probably a hand-me-down from her family.

The last things Kai's eyes were drawn to were the screen of a giant, over fifty-inch wide TV and the seemingly high-tech video recorder under it. From Kotobuki's typical demeanor, Kai could assume that she wasn't given much of an allowance, making the lack of merchandise despite her otaku credentials perfectly understandable. Her enthusiast-grade audio setup was probably something her parents bought for her. One could assume that they were pretty understanding when it came to watching anime.

"Please don't stare so much... It's embarrassing..."

"Oh, sorry..."

Kai straightened up quickly after Kotobuki's pouty request. They faced each other while sitting on their knees atop floor cushions. Kotobuki was, incidentally, still in her cosplay. Kai was told not to look around her room, so he had no choice but to focus his staring on her. Hestia was a character known for her large breasts, a feature Kotobuki seemed to recreate; her normally modest and unassuming bust was now prominently filled out.

"The blue ribbon looks nice on you."

"I do *not* appreciate that."

Kai's roundabout way of asking what was up with her tits didn't go smoothly, but she still gave him an answer as her eyes shifted from side to side.

“I put in four pads.”

“*Four?*”

“I do *not* appreciate that.”

Another comment that failed to go over smoothly.

“If you were to ask me,” continued Kotobuki while still pouting, “a slender body type is far more suited to cosplaying. It’s simple to add what isn’t there, but quite difficult to remove what already is.”

“Do you...like cosplaying?” asked Kai in a show of agreement with her theory.

“...Yes,” answered Kotobuki faintly. She must have been mortified. She frequently cast her eyes downward or in any direction away from Kai. “To be perfectly honest, I do.”

“I hadn’t the faintest idea,” said Kai boisterously in an attempt to cheer her up.

“Because I hid it. Though I intended to reveal the truth slowly over time.”

“Ah, so that’s where the Guild Girl on our date came from.”

“Yes, that’s right. I chose to start small.”

“I can’t imagine there would have been any issue with being upfront.”

“I-I was scared of getting laughed at if I dropped it all at once... I don’t even tell my friends at school.”

Ah yes, the true form of an emotional trainwreck.

“Well, I wouldn’t laugh. I think it’s a fantastic hobby.”

“You may not laugh, but that grin on your face is dangerously close to laughter!”

“This is not done out of disrespect for your hobby, but rather out of how it’s touched my heart.”

“Y-Your heart?”

“Though your reactions tickle my funny bone.”

“I do *not* appreciate that.”

Kai had to chuckle at how smoothly his comments were *not* going over.

“Is cosplay what you typically spend your money on?” Kai was aware that cosplaying was expensive, and definitely a cost-prohibitive hobby for your average high schooler. It would also explain Kotobuki’s frequent complaints about her financial situation, or so he thought.

“Oh, not at all. My mother makes the costumes I wear.”

“My, you have quite the understanding mother!”

“I do. My mother began as a cosplayer who created her own costumes, after all. She quit when she gave birth to me, but she put the skills she developed from her hobby to work by opening this dressmaking shop.”

“I see. She *is* quite young.” Moms these days were on another level. Kai was jealous.

“What? My mother turns forty-five this year. She often brags about being among the first generation of cosplayers.”

“That’s six years older than my mom!”

“I’m afraid she’s quite skilled at makeup.”

“Man, there oughta be limits to that...” Kai didn’t see any part of her that looked older than her thirties. Was she not human? “So, have you cosplayed with your mother before?”

“Sadly, not even once. She merely puts me in an outfit, joyfully takes photos, and that’s the end of that.”

“Did those photos happen to end up online?”

“No, my mother forbids that, as she does with going to cosplay events. She won’t allow either until I’m an adult.”

It made sense; a daughter like this needed a mother like that. Mrs. Hotei might have seemed carefree, but she was strict where it mattered. It wasn’t hard to imagine that cosplay photos of someone as beautiful as Kotobuki would attract an incredibly creepy crowd if they were uploaded to Twitter and the like. As for events, while the majority of people attending are practitioners of the craft, the amount of unsavory folks among the crowds are by no means zero.

Kai had heard some credible rumors about the trouble some people encountered. Mrs. Hotei probably figured that her daughter could make her own choices as an adult but still needed her protection as a student.

“Then I take it you typically enjoy your cosplays at home?”

“Yes, as a cold and lonely activity.”

“Now, now, nobody’s judging, so you needn’t be so hard on yourself.”

For one thing, just about all otaku hobbies were enjoyed alone in one’s house. Kai smiled, and Kotobuki smiled with him.

I feel silly for worrying so much, thought Kai as he watched his coworker grin. All those fears about being hated or driven away were clearly figments of his imagination. Once they met each other again, they talked like nothing had changed. He had Jun to thank for pushing him to come here.

“I feel I must apologize for ignoring your messages and not answering your calls,” said Kotobuki, apparently sensing why Kai had come over. She bowed her head to reiterate her apology.

“Please, raise your head. It’s no longer of any concern to me. But may I ask the reason why?”

“Very well,” said Kotobuki. She seemed like she had made the tough decision to answer. But she was still an emotional trainwreck, so her explanation came cautiously.

“The truth is...I was fully prepared for you to reject me last night. And I willed myself to keep trying for as many times as it would take if you did.” Kotobuki candidly explained the emotions she felt as she pressured Kai into that kiss. That was probably one of the things she was apologizing for.

“However, I failed to consider anything beyond that. I didn’t realize the consequences of my actions until you pointed out that we wouldn’t be able to see each other again because of them. I’m truly such a child...so much so that I merely wanted to crawl into a corner.”

“And once you got in there, you couldn’t work up the courage to make your way out?”

“Correct. With how certain I was that you’d lost all respect for me or grown sick of my presence, it was hard to know how I could face you again.”

Kai couldn’t laugh off her concerns or say she didn’t need to go that far. The only reason he figured it wasn’t a big deal was because he knew his own emotions; it must have been terrifying for Kotobuki, who had no way of knowing what he was thinking. In that regard, Kai was no different; until he finally spoke with Kotobuki face-to-face and learned how she truly felt, he had just been agonizing at home.

“I would never grow sick of you, Kotobuki. I always hold you in high regard.”

“...Can I truly believe those words?”

“Of course. If anything, I was the one who had been fretting that I’d burned my bridge with you.”

“That’s preposterous! A-After all, N-Nakamura, I lo-lo-lo...” Kotobuki’s cheeks grew visibly flushed, preventing her from finishing that sentence.

“I-I understand,” said Kai as he butted in. He was getting unseemingly embarrassed as well. “You needn’t repeat yourself, really!”

But that just made Kotobuki even more determined to speak her mind.

“I wuv you, even after all this.”

Sadly, she flubbed it. On the one word that really mattered, at that. Kai quickly tried to avoid reacting and pretended not to notice, but there was no hiding from someone whose perception was as skillfully honed as Kotobuki’s.

“That’s all,” said Kotobuki with her eyes wide open. “That’s why I ignored your calls.”

“I see, that explains everything. It was worth coming just to confirm that neither of us have grown depressed over it.”

Kai followed her lead and wrapped up the conversation as gently as he could. His consideration seemed to pay off as Kotobuki’s expression softened before she continued.

“It was. And having you come to my rescue when I was too cowardly to visit you made me very...very happy.”

Like a bud blooming into a flower, her lips spread into a lovely smile. It was a grin that suited her so well that it could sweep anyone off their feet. Kai was convinced that working up the courage to barge in was worth it for just this sight alone.



With their misunderstanding now fully behind them, Kai now treated his visit like he did any other hangout at a friend's house. When he asked to see Kotobuki's cosplay collection, she obliged and led him to her walk-in closet. What awaited him was a spectacular display of dozens of costumes hung on the closet's racks.

“And your mother made all of these?”

“Of course,” boasted Kotobuki. She puffed out her chest, which was still sporting four pads beneath her Hestia costume. She must have been proud of her mom. As an otaku, Kai could understand. He was even jealous.

One by one, Kai asked for permission to look at each costume before delicately taking down its hanger and examining it. They were clearly handmade; Kai could tell that each one was a perfect fit for Kotobuki's frame.

“A lot of these are from some old anime.”

“That they are. Some costumes were requests from me after I got into a show during its airing, and some were costumes my mother made me wear when *she* got into a show.”

Now that's what I call a head start.

“Could this one be...from *Oreshura*?”

“Yes, that's the Hanenoyama High uniform. Uniform costumes are difficult to tell apart, but I should have known you'd be able to identify it. For a six-year-old anime, at that.”

“Actually, I only watched it pretty recently.” Kai was in the later grades of elementary school at the time it aired. He was often made fun of by the

classroom jerks for watching “cutesy” anime, so he resisted watching it back then. Looking back, he realized he’d been an idiot and deeply regretted not committing to his hobbies, but that was a delicate age. In recent years, he read the acclaimed series *29 to JK* and loved it, causing him to dig through the back catalog of its author, Yuuji Yuuji. He loved *Oreshura* and *Reinesickle* and even rented the Blu-rays for *Oreshura*’s anime adaptation. He was definitely on a Yuuji Yuuji kick for a while.

Kotobuki wistfully stroked the Hanenoyama High uniform. “I was in fourth grade at the time, but my mother and I got hooked on the show together.”

“I can understand why. Masuzu’s the best. JoJo references are a good brand of cuteness.”

“Pardon? Surely you mean Chiwawa.”

For a moment, sparks flew as Kai and Kotobuki glared at each other.

“Well, I can certainly understand where you’re coming from. You were in fourth grade when you watched it, no? Chiwawa has the cuteness of a small, fuzzy animal, and kids love that stuff.”

“Excuse me? I was mature for my age, so I could fully appreciate Misuzu’s annoying cuteness. I merely state that even compared to her, Chiwawa proves victorious.”

“Ha ha, surely you jest. Had you been in the main character’s shoes, *Oreshura*’s quality would undoubtedly have suffered for it.”

“Tee hee, perhaps you should limit your jokes to your haircut. Are you not ashamed to spew these ignorant lunacies with such misplaced confidence? You should beg Yuuji Yuuji to forgive you for failing to realize that the story was written with Chiwawa in mind as the primary love interest.”

“Ha ha ha.”

“Tee hee hee.”

Neither was willing to yield their position on the battlefield they found themselves upon and instead smiled as they traded blows with their glares. Still, continuing this war would only end in a stalemate, so Kai returned the

Hanenoyama uniform back to its rack. Well, not quite; he had one realization as he was about to hang it up.

“You had this costume made for you back when the show aired, correct?”

“Yes, what of it?”

“If I’m not mistaken, it seems like it would still be able to fit you...”

Kotobuki’s eyes suddenly darted away. Must be unfortunate.

But now that I’ve noticed it, it just doesn’t feel right, thought Kai as he looked over the dozens of hanging costumes in horror. Every costume was the same size. Kai could barely fit into the clothes he wore a year ago, much less what he wore six years ago. After bearing the weight of Kai’s continued gaze, Kotobuki crumbled and came clean in a shaking voice.

“The truth is...I was a very tall child when I was younger. I was always last in line in elementary school, and my relatives frequently joked that I’d become a model or win the Ms. Sakata pageant...”

“But then you stopped growing...when you were merely in fourth grade...”

“By all means, laugh if you will!”

“I would never!” argued Kai, not telling a single lie. “Kotobuki, you’re cute as you are!”

“Th-Thank you very much,” said Kotobuki as she smiled bashfully and fidgeted around.

“Besides, you’re the one who said that slender bodies were better suited to cosplaying!”

“...You wish to say my chest hasn’t grown either, don’t you? Not that I can deny it...”

Her smile vanished in a moment. She then sulked and muttered that she shouldn’t have picked Hestia, giving Kai another question to ask.

“By the way, why *did* you choose Hestia?”

All the costumes he’d seen so far had been made for her during the airings of shows she enjoyed, but *DanMachi* wasn’t airing now. Its long-awaited second

season wouldn't begin for another two months. That meant that this costume had to have been made during the first season's airing four years ago. He assumed there had to be a motivation for her to pull out this costume of all possibilities.

"It was by coincidence. I mean, there was no particular reason it *had* to be Hestia..."

"No reason at all?"

"But I needed to take a large amount of cosplay photos..."

"Meaning?"

"Please, look at this."

Kotobuki retrieved a brand-new tablet from her desk. Come to think of it, Kotobuki had said she was saving up her wages to purchase one. After a few taps here and there, Kotobuki pulled up an image and showed it to Kai. It seemed to be an advertisement, or maybe a pamphlet? The headline read "1st Annual Sakata Cosplay Festival" and below it were photos of downright gorgeous men and women in high-level cosplays.

"I've never heard of this event," said Kai. If he knew such a cool festival was going to happen in his hometown, neither he nor Jun would miss it for the world.

"It's only natural that you wouldn't. This event is still in the planning stages."

"My my. Then may I ask why you know of it, Kotobuki?"

"Because my father and some relatives are working with the city to put it together."

"My my! Could I trouble you for the details?"

"But of course," said Kotobuki. She was only too eager to explain.

After the war, the Hotei family made their livelihood as wholesalers. The main house had already earned some fame in Sakata City by being a common location for city council meetings. But the tides of time can be cruel, and the growing criticism of the apparel industry made its mark on the Hoteis as well.

With their survival on the line, the family's current generation was willing to try anything and see what stuck.

The market that caught the eye of Kotobuki's father (an executive in the family business) was cosplay manufacturing. Despite its growing fame and attention, it was hard to say that one could find many places to enjoy cosplay or buy supplies for crafting costumes outside of Tokyo. That meant that there was a business opportunity. They wanted to recreate the success of Nippori Fabric Town here in Sakata City!

They settled on whetting the city's appetite by establishing a cosplay event as the first step of their plan. They'd also make an environment that could support cosplaying activities, thereby increasing the amount of potential customers. Once that was set up, the Hoteis could profit by having cosplayers purchase cosplay-related goods they planned to market. Or maybe they could offer classes in cosplay sewing techniques and nourish a DIY cosplay culture.

And all this was happening while Kai was none the wiser.

"I had no idea you were high society, Kotobuki."

Maybe that was why Kotobuki was so tight with money. Maybe her parents were the strict kind and chose to limit her allowance to teach her the value of a yen.

"No, I'm afraid not. My family is a rather distant branch of the family tree."

"Ah, so you aren't!"

"My father often gripes that middle managers at the big corporations make more than him."

"He sounds picky!"

"That's why my father aims to use this plan as his big break in the family. It might even result in my entrance to high society."

"Ah, so those are your priorities," joked Kai. He understood from her tone that that last one was at least half-joking. Kotobuki soon returned to the topic at hand.

“My father plans to create a website advertising the event. This image is a prototype of its homepage.”

“I see, but the people in the photos all seem to be rather serious cosplayers. Almost as though they’re professionals.”

“We actually did commission professional models for these photos.”

“Ah, figures.” While Kai was only familiar with internet hearsay, he’d heard that many cosplayers these days were signed with model agencies.

“However...don’t you agree that we have depressingly few photos for an advertisement?”

“A site is more than its homepage, so a few more certainly wouldn’t hurt. Could you not commission more photos from these cosplayers?”

“It would be difficult for our budget.”

“Oh my. Pro models charge quite the premium, I see.”

“They do, but we also have to get a professional photographer to take the pictures, hire a pro stylist to do their makeup, and then go through the proper channels to rent the location that the photo is taken at. That’s apparently where it all adds up.”

“Ah... I suppose pro models would be particular about that.”

“While they may welcome the work, having a low-quality photo in their portfolio would harm their image.”

“I must admit I wouldn’t have given thought to that normally.” Kai’s usual thoughts when seeing a photo of a godlike cosplayer online were more along the lines of *wow, cute*.

“However, this event is intended for attendees who cosplay as a hobby to gather and enjoy themselves. As such, I feel that not all of our promotional images must be top-quality pictures of top-quality cosplayers. A few amateur photos might excite those who’d like something more accessible.”

“You raise quite the fair point,” said Kai as he nodded deeply. When he put it all together, he figured out why Kotobuki went with Hestia. “So, you plan to take pictures with your mother’s handmade costumes to help with your father’s

work?”

“I figure I may as well do something with all the costumes I have. Besides, I have a high society debut to ensure.” Kotobuki seemed to shift to her adorable snide talk due to being embarrassed for having her filial piety commended. Still, Kai understood.

“I’m quite interested in this proposal myself, so I believe I can help take pictures. That would surely help you capture a wider variety of poses than you could by taking selfies.”

“Are you sure, Nakamura?”

“But of course, I’d be glad to. Now, lend me your smartphone.” Kai extended his right arm with a smile.

However, Kotobuki seemed to take that offer a different way, and instead stared closely at his open palm. She wavered. Hesitated. And then, she suddenly grabbed his hand with both of hers. The sensation of Kotobuki’s smooth skin made Kai’s heart skip a beat.

“Er, well, you see,” stammered Kotobuki. Kai was dumbfounded, but her muddled response suggested that her head wasn’t any clearer. “If you wouldn’t mind, perhaps you could cosplay as well? That is...if you’re not opposed to the idea, we could use it as promotional material. It’d be quite the help.”

Kai didn’t expect this request. His eyes widened slightly as he gave it his honest consideration.

“I must admit that I’d love the chance, and I wouldn’t be opposed to having my photograph used.” Cosplaying was about becoming a character, which meant the photographed results were often quite far from what one normally looked like out of costume. As such, he probably wouldn’t have to worry about being found out if any photos were put on the internet. “However, the financial hurdle would prove quite the bottleneck.”

He imagined that costumes, wigs, and accessories were far from cheap, but Kotobuki shook her head with great dynamics.

“Of course, we would cover those costs!”

“Really? Is that something I could ask for?”

“This is a company project, so it’s only natural! If anything, we’d pay you a wage!”

“Oh no, I don’t need that much.” Having it treated as a job would mean that much more responsibility for Kai. His interest in cosplay was really just as an outlet for playing pretend, so he’d rather be carefree about it. Kotobuki took this explanation as quite the shock.

“Nobody would blame you if you simply pocketed the payment... You’re quite the principled one, Nakamura.” Despite her compliments, Kai couldn’t help but feel a bit of heat in the look she gave him, so he flinched and returned to the subject at hand.

“If those are the conditions, I would gladly cooperate with this cosplay experience.”

“I should be thanking you, Nakamura.”

“Incidentally, this promotion would work best with more contributors, correct?”

“Indeed it would. The more images we had to work with, the more exciting the project will seem.”

“Well, I just so happen to have a rather trustworthy contributor in mind. Someone who just so happens to be well-versed in otaku culture, yet has looks rivaling any pro model.”

“Geh... Would this someone happen to be Miyakawa?”

“Correct you are,” confirmed Kai extravagantly. A pro model would be an expert in how to appear photogenic; their knowledge of what poses to take and what expressions to give would be far beyond anything an amateur like Jun could compete with. But in terms of raw beauty, Kai was certain that Jun was on their level. Since Kotobuki was also a strong contender in that regard, a photo with *both* of them *combined* would have a power many times greater—if not exponentially so—than the sum of its parts.

“You might be right, but...”

Kotobuki seemed unsure as to whether she should or shouldn't ask Jun. Kai figured that maybe she still didn't quite get along with her, or maybe there was some other consideration. Her prior suggestion for the three of them to hang out seemed to have a different purpose to it, so maybe she'd had a change of heart since then.

"Nakamura...could you be the one to ask her for me?" In the end, she couldn't argue against the benefits of having Jun in the promo shots.

"I think she'd be more motivated if you were the one to beg her for it."

"I dare not imagine what unsavory intentions she'd hold if I did! We'll pay Miyakawa for her time, so I'd prefer this be kept as strictly business."

"Ha ha, I kid. I'll ask her. But I suspect she won't accept a wage either, so be prepared for that."

"Oooh... Just as I feared..."

"Hah, I'll be sure to stop her if she goes overboard," said Kai as he cheered up his forlorn friend.

With the deal now settled, they took a ton of promotional photos. One after the other, Kotobuki dressed up as Nezuko, Kaguya Shinomiya, bunny girl Mai, Yuuki, Albedo, Kurumi Tokisaki...just about anyone with black hair. Since this was primarily a hobby she didn't show to others, she didn't have any wigs or hairpieces. However, these were going up on a website; no matter how amateur the cosplay, portraying a blonde character while keeping one's hair black would just come off as lazy. They wanted to make things casual, but they figured there were limits.

That aside, Kotobuki just couldn't make the poses or expressions that the pro models could. As an emotional trainwreck, her bashfulness at being in front of the smartphone camera Kai held never fully vanished.

Well, figured Kai as they looked over the photos they took, *I think people will cut her some slack.*

Kotobuki's cosplays were cute as hell, so it'd even out. Who'd disagree?

Episode 007: High School Beauties Have It Easy Even In Their First Collab!

Kai returned home early that evening. Mrs. Hotei said he could hang around later if he wanted, but Kai decided to be considerate for his first visit to this (girl!) friend's house. Once he made it home, he immediately called up Jun.

"...And that's what we talked about. So, wanna cosplay with us?"

"I do!" responded Jun. As Kai expected, she didn't think twice.

"Okay then, we'll meet up at Kotobuki's place after school tomorrow and plan it out. We've gotta get her mom to take our measurements and then decide what characters we wanna cosplay. And quickly too, since it'll probably take a while to get the costumes ready."

"Hmmm, so many options... I dunno how to decide..."

"I feel that. It's something I've wanted to try for a long time, but now that I've got the actual opportunity, well..."

"Yeah, I get greedy thinking about all the characters I wanna try."

"But according to Kotobuki's mom, she can make two costumes in a day if they're not ridiculously complex designs."

"For real?! That fast?!"

"She's not selling suits for six figures, so she has to work that fast to turn a profit. She's a pro, after all. And apparently, the quick people can work even faster than that."

"Pros are so sick!"

"I know, right? Anyway, we've got about two weeks to prepare, and since she's got existing jobs to take care of, you and I can probably get around five or six costumes each."

"That's overkill! I gotta thank her!"

“Yeah, me too. That said...it’s probably best to pick characters that match the costumes Kotobuki already has. And characters who need complicated props like the Blue Rose Sword are out by default. That goes double for characters with clunky suits of armor, like Goblin Slayer.”

“Mhm. What about wigs? I think those take a while.”

“Kotobuki said her dad could get the company to prepare those. They’ve got specialty shops for them and they can get pro stylists to do the haircuts, so it wouldn’t take as long as you’d think. Then again, that’s because they can afford it!”

“Wow, I love cosplaying on someone else’s dime!”

“Hey now, let’s not say anything unprofessional here. Even if it’s true.”

So went their discussion.

Mrs. Hotei also asked them to make sure they got their parents’ permission first. Kai’s parents valued their children’s independence, so they agreed. Jun’s parents (as well as her creepily protective brothers) also agreed under the condition that she not dress in anything too provocative and that they could oversee the finalized pictures for approval.

The next day, they were at the Hotei residence working out the details with Kotobuki while getting their measurements taken. All that was left was to ask Kotobuki’s parents to make the costumes and wait until they were finished. Their photo shoot would take place on June 8th (a Sunday), so Kai and Jun had about two weeks to wait in excitement.

Of course, they weren’t going to just be twiddling their thumbs. Even men should apply makeup if they’re going to cosplay, but Kai had spent his life having nothing to do with the stuff, so he’d need to practice under Jun’s tutelage. Meanwhile, Jun had long hair, so she’d need to tie it tightly behind her head and secure it with a hairpin if she wanted to wear a wig. That was difficult to do alone, so Kai needed to practice doing that for her.

I never thought the day would come where I’d help a girl style her hair, he thought. He was struck with awe plenty of times as he fiddled with her fragrant,

silky-smooth hair. You never know where life takes you.

And so, the day of truth arrived. Kai and Jun were giddy with excitement as they gathered at the Hotei residence at 9 a.m. Mrs. Hotei then drove the three to the photo shoot location.

“It’s an empty house that some relatives lived in until a year ago,” explained Mrs. Hotei. “There’s enough space to get changed and take pictures in peace. It’s got western-style rooms, Japanese-style rooms, and a wide garden, so you’ll have options for backgrounds.”

“We simply can’t thank you enough.”

“Thanks a ton!”

Kai and Jun both bowed their heads to the driver’s seat from the backseat of the car. Tokyo had plenty of rental studios for cosplayers, but when they looked up the prices, they found they were shockingly expensive (for high schoolers). Even if they split the costs, a mere two-hour rental would be brutal. But now, they were getting to borrow an empty house for free.

“Oh no,” said Mrs. Hotei, laughing as though it was no big deal. “If anything, I should be thanking you for helping with my husband’s work. Oh, and give us some feedback on how the place is for photos! There’s been talk of renovating it into a rental studio if this cosplay business takes off.”

She certainly had a saleswoman’s spirit.

The empty house in question was a freestanding building in the mountains on the outskirts of Sakata City. In fact, you could practically call it a mansion.

“I think it was built a good fifty years ago, so it’s getting up there in age, and it ain’t getting any closer to the city. That’s why my relatives moved to a freshly built apartment by a train station.” In between her laughter, Mrs. Hotei gave them permission to tear the place a new one since it was family property that wasn’t getting used any time soon. Kai and Jun gracefully took her at her word.

“Anyway, I’ve gotta tend to the store, so give me a call when you’re done.” Mrs. Hotei took the steering wheel and left for home. The fledgling cosplayers

entered the property with the luggage case they took from the trunk in tow.

Kotobuki unlocked the front door and entered the foyer, remarking about how...well, big the house was. The estate consisted of a single story building with heavily Japanese architecture and a two-story Western-style building erected next to it. They were feeling a bit adventurous and decided to explore all around the mansion, but soon lost count of how many rooms there were. Mr. Hotei had the power and water service restored the other day, so they weren't in want of any modern conveniences. The old furniture was all left as it was, including two vanities with full-length mirrors—just like the one in Kotobuki's room.

They realized they should start getting changed into their outfits, so the girls moved to split up from Kai.

“Oh, Jun, I should probably tie your hair first.”

“All yours.”

Kai realized that she'd just need to swap wigs to change characters if her hair was tied in advance, so Jun went along with his suggestion. But at that moment, something flared up deep within Kotobuki's eyes.

“Nakamura, may I ask that you tie my hair as well?”

“I wouldn't mind...but Kotobuki, I could have sworn that you were plenty capable of doing that on your own.” After all, Kotobuki had changed her hairstyle with stunning prowess many times during their first cosplay photo shoot two weeks ago.

“Not at all. My mother does that for me.”

“Um.”

“My mother does that for me.”

“She's right, Kai. She's not switching to a hairstyle she uses all the time. This one's hard to tie on your own.”

“Well, sure, I'll just go with that.”

First, Kai put Jun's hair into a tight bun and fastened it with a hairpin. Next, he nervously went to help Kotobuki, whose lovely hair was so long that it reached

her lap. It was just as silky and fragrant as Jun's hair. Kotobuki seemed just a bit pleased with herself.

Once he finished tying the girls' hair, Kai went to a different room to change. First, he applied the natural makeup style that Jun had drilled into him. It felt a bit strange every time he did it, almost like the made-up face in the mirror was somehow not his own. However, you could say that hint of surrealism fit perfectly with a hobby as luxurious as cosplaying. Jun and Kotobuki said they were even planning to use fake eyelashes and color contacts. Kai didn't want to go that far, though; he'd never used contacts anyway and was scared of putting things in his eyes.

Once his makeup was done, it was time to put on a costume, starting with a group *DanMachi* cosplay. He pulled up his white pants and fastened his deep brown boots. Next, he donned the kimono-like cloak that flared out like a skirt at the bottom. Once he tied the blue scarf around his neck and put on the bright red wig, he was finished. He was now dressed as the main character, Bell... 's partner, Welf the blacksmith.

He liked Bell, sure, but he liked Welf even more. Welf was a loose cannon, but was also a diamond in the rough. His relationship with Hephaestus was OTP-tier too.

"H-Hm... It looks like I'm dressed up for a shrine visit. I don't seem like a loose cannon or a diamond in the rough to me."

Well, it was all in the emotion! He just had to have fun! He had to have more confidence in his appearance than normal!!! And so, Kai solemnly swore not to make himself depressed by comparing himself to Jun or Kotobuki.

He headed toward the western-style living room where they agreed to gather. It was a good twenty square meters wide and was devoid of furniture besides the fluorescent light that hung from the ceiling like a chandelier, making it the perfect scenery for western fantasy characters. Kai was the first to arrive. It seemed like getting ready took more time for women.

While he was alone, Kai decided to get into the character of Ignis the Everburning by posing, casting the Will o' Wisp spell, chanting "Blasphemous

Burn,” and generally having fun with it. Welf was known for his stupidly huge sword, but that was naturally a bit difficult to prepare, so Kai had to settle for going barehanded. Instead, his mind raced to the scene where Welf backed up Bell by casting Will o’ Wisp and he got lost in re-enacting it. Until he heard someone coming, of course, at which point he quickly stopped.

“I’m ready, Nakamura.”

“Huh? Where’s Jun?”

“She’s still taking her time changing. I offered to help, but she suggested I go on ahead.”

It made sense that Kotobuki would have the edge in speed when it was only Jun’s first time cosplaying. Incidentally, Kotobuki’s first costume today was the Hestia outfit Kai saw two weeks ago. And two weeks later, she was still just as cute. Her bust was again stuffed full with four pads and her blue ribbon was hard to miss.

“How does your costume feel?” asked Kotobuki while Kai was lost in his admiration.

“Ah. Totally fine. It’s easy to move in.”

“Excellent to hear. My mother admitted that she cut a few corners in crafting these costumes since they weren’t meant for everyday use.”

“This is cutting corners? Well, it’s plenty fine for me.” Pros were something else.

“Also...”

“What is it, Kotobuki?” Kai tilted his head at Kotobuki, who seemed to try to say something but couldn’t find the words. Her eyes darted around as she slowly pieced a sentence together.

“Y-Y-Y-You, You look...very nice in that.”

“Ah... Ha ha... Thank you very much.” It was Kai’s first cosplay, so he appreciated the compliment, even if it was obligatory. He also felt incredibly bashful.

“Y-You’re very welcome...” Even the person who gave Kai the compliment

was turning beet-red.

Wait, this is bad! Kai realized. If Jun stepped in and saw a scene like this, he'd die of embarrassment. He had to change the mood.

"Anyway, I wanna get some use out of this lighting while we've got it, so how about we take some test shots?"

Kai started talking like an expert cameraman. Part of it was a joke to lighten the atmosphere, and part of it was an extension of the acting that his cosplay allowed him to do. No part of it involved having the knowledge or skill he claimed, though, so he pointed his smartphone at Kotobuki and pressed the shutter button on a whim.

"Miss Model, you seem a bit stiff. Maybe stick out your chest a bit more?"

"D-Don't make fun of me!"

Kotobuki objected, but she was undeniably stiff. It figured that the first hurdle would be for her to get over her embarrassment. Despite the fact that the moneymaker of a Hestia costume was how boldly it exposed the wearer's cleavage (according to Kai), Kotobuki was hunched over and covered her chest with her arms. Kai wondered if she was embarrassed to have them looked at even though it was all padding, but he obviously didn't have the guts to ask. *DanMachi's* Hestia was known for being a bundle of cheer and an emotional rock for everyone else, which Kotobuki couldn't even pretend to be...not that she could pretend to have the proportions either.

Oh well, thought Kai. *It's no big deal. I'm not gonna ask the impossible when we're just having fun.*

Kai took a ton of pictures without sweating the details. He'd later save them to cloud storage.

Jun eventually arrived during their photo shoot. Beneath her iconic green cloak was a sleeveless white shirt that clung tightly to the curves of her body, a pair of long, green gloves and boots, and some bloomer-looking thing on the bottom. She wore a costume of the elf with a tragic past, Ryuu.

"I'm ready! Let's get snapping!"

Jun made a cheerful little dash, causing her chest to bounce all around under her thin, skin-tight shirt. Kotobuki glared. Ryu was rather busty for an elf (or at least, for an otaku's typical idea of an elf), but Jun might have been too big even for that. Kotobuki might have had a point when she said it was easy to add what wasn't there but hard to remove what was.

"Oh yeah, I borrowed a secret weapon from my dad!" Jun boasted as she pulled out a digital SLR camera.

"Was that wise, Miyakawa? It looks rather expensive..."

"I sure don't know how you're supposed to handle that stuff."

"Don't sweat it. My dad buys replacements for these without using 'em to begin with, so we've got a ton lying around. Mom said she was totally fine with me breaking some of his crap to teach him a lesson."

"You've gotta be kidding me..."

"I hear there are all kinds of SLR cameras, so perhaps it's not as expensive as it looks."

Kai and Kotobuki came to their own conclusions. They were shocked to later learn that it was a super expensive camera (costing six digits!), making them wonder what the hell her dad did for a living. That's a story for another time, though.

"Well, as a show of my gratitude, how about we start by taking pictures of you first, Jun?"

"Hee hee, I feel kinda nervous now," said Jun. Not that this stopped her from grinning ear to ear and making a peace sign. She must have been excited to wear the same outfit as her favorite character, Ryu. And with a click of the shutter, that smile was captured.

"Well? Well? How'd it come out?"

"...Not great." Being able to immediately check a picture was one of the positives of digital cameras. Kai didn't hide the results, showing Jun the out-of-focus smile that had been captured. "This just isn't Ryu."

"I believe with SLR cameras, you must manually adjust the focus to get a good

picture. One of the knobs should do it.”

“Is that true, Hotey?!”

“It allows a skilled photographer to capture a particular effect in their photos, but for a beginner, a typical smartphone camera would likely yield better results by default.”

“Aww... I had no idea...”

And so, the SLR camera gently went back into its bag.

With that behind them, Kai took some smartphone photos of Jun. One of her strengths was her constant cheer, meaning she was always quick to bounce back after any disappointment.

“Well? Well? Am I a cute Ryuu? Am I?”

“Yep, you’re cute, totally.”

Kai praised Jun without reservation as he took pictures of her smiling and making peace signs. Jun even got a little too into it and hung her hands like cat paws, among other original poses that Ryuu would probably never make outside of an OVA.

“I mean, you’re definitely cute, but...”

The person inside was Jun, after all. Her costume was a design by the godlike Suzuhito Yasuda, after all. And she was wearing that green bloomer...thing, after all.

“You gotta actually act like Ryuu. Act like an aloof beauty. Don’t ruin Ryuu’s image.”

“Whaaat? No way. I’m too happy, my cheeks are gonna come out stretched. I’m breaking my cheek muscles for this.”

“Jun, for crying out loud...”

Nobody was trying to see a blushing Ryuu...unless? Maybe they could pass off their Ryuu with her powered-up boobs as different, but good in its own way? Could they get away with making die-hard fans angry? Kai agonized over these

eternal questions and continued mashing the shutter button. Until...

“Nakamura, is it not about time to take pictures of me?” asked Kotobuki as something flared up deep within her eyes. “Cute ones.”

“Okay Hotey, let’s take some with the both of us!”

“My apologies, but I’d rather start with solo shots until I’m satisfied. Cute ones.”

She seemed awfully particular about them being cute. Still, Kai buckled against the force of the pressure she silently exuded, so he kept silent and followed along. When he pointed the smartphone camera at her, Kotobuki almost turned into a different person; she put on a cheerful expression as she gave a thumbs-up pose, just like Hestia would. She no longer hid her boldly exposed (fake) cleavage, instead showing it off front and center.

“Ooh, that’s good.”

“Am I cute?”

“You’re very cute. That’s a goddess for you!”

Kai perked up and pressed the shutter button with glee. That seemed to help Kotobuki’s mood as she finally agreed to take some pair shots with Jun. But the closer Kotobuki got to Hestia, the more out of place it felt to have a happy-go-lucky Ryuu.

Lastly, it was time to get photos of Kai in his Welf costume. He had pumped himself up to make some cool poses beforehand, but having the lens actually pointed at him made him nervous and embarrassed. He finally understood how Kotobuki felt. Still, he refrained from ruining the character’s personality like Jun did and managed to pose for a few satisfactory shots. They were good enough to get across the energy a promotional site needed.

Of course, he also got some photos with Jun and Kotobuki.

“C’mon, Kai! Do a peace sign! Yay!”

“Ignis the Everburning doesn’t do peace signs!”

“C’mon, just do a peace sign! Don’t be a buzzkill!”

“Jun, the only one killing the buzz around here is you!”

Kai complained, but he still found himself going with her pace. In the end, they came out with photos of a nonplussed Welf and a beaming Ryu both making peace signs. They were some truly nightmarish cosplay photos that threw the atmosphere of the source material into a wood chipper. Kai wouldn't dare use these to promote anything due to the fear of fan backlash.

Next came his shots with Kotobuki, but...

“...Aren't you a bit close, Hestia?”

“Nonsense, Welf. I'm a goddess who treasures her Familia, so this distance is just showing my affection!”

“You've got the tone down, but Hestia would never say that...”

“M-My Hestia would!”

“Yeah, a fake Hestia!”

“C'mon, Welf, you're gonna say no to me when you're so close with that elf?”

“Hey, don't make Welf sound like a womanizer!”

Jun found their bickering over Kotobuki's clinginess entertaining and snapped a ton of photos, producing some truly nightmarish cosplay photos. Kai wouldn't dare use *these* to promote anything either due to the fear of fan backlash.

Last, they all decided to take a sort-of commemorative photo together. To get all three of them to fit in the frame of the selfie camera, the two girls had to stick close to either side of Kai. He was aware they didn't have a choice, but being conscious of it would have made his heart beat out of his chest, so he tried his best to empty his mind.

Sadly, the photo that came out took him aback as he came face-to-face with objective reality. Jun's Ryu probably wasn't doing it intentionally, but the way she leaned into Kai, well...meant that her boobs were touching him. That seemed to piss off Kotobuki's Hestia, who responded by clinging to Kai's arm with both of hers while nobody was looking.

This could've worked if I was cosplaying Bell, thought Kai, but the reality was

that he was Welf, making this cosplay photo go right past nightmarish and into NTR territory. Yet another photo Kai wouldn't dare use to promote anything due to the fear of fan backlash. And backlash from the author, Fujino Omori.

After a change of outfits, the three got together for round two: the *Date A Live* group cosplay. And when Kai saw the Kaguya costume Jun wore, he was shocked. He knew going in that Kaguya had a very, uh, bondage-inspired costume...by which he meant it was ridiculously revealing, with the naughty bits above the waist covered by just a few belts. But when he saw what he was faced with...

"Jun, we agreed that you'd wear a flesh-colored undershirt under that! You can't get away with that if you actually show the skin!"

"Aww, it's no biggie."

It was, in fact, a massive biggie. He saw two biggies right there, with little left to the imagination.

"It's not like anyone's watching, and wearing an undershirt feels so trashy, you know?"

"A dude is right here!"

"It's like a swimsuit, isn't it? We've been friends long enough that you've seen that plenty."

Yes, it was true that Kai had basked in the glory of Jun's magnificent swimsuit figure last summer. But!

"If we took photos of you in that outfit, Royalteach would murder me!"

"He won't notice a thing, trust me."

"Smartphone cameras are high-res these days!"

Kai's other pressing concern was the absolute inferno raging in Kotobuki's eyes, so it wasn't happening!

Round three was the *Fate/Apocrypha* cosplay. For this one, Kotobuki challenged herself to crossplay. She wore some fake glasses, put on a white top with gold details, and dressed up as her favorite character, Caules.

All she has to do is wear some shoulder pads and she can get away with not binding her chest, noticed Kai. *That's impressive; flat chests really are a status symbol in the world of cosplay.*

Not that Kai would dare let an iota of that thought show in his attitude.

Kotobuki tested out some expressions and poses to demonstrate Caules's character, a vaguely unreliable boy with glasses. Unfortunately, she still wasn't too used to acting so they didn't come off well. She looked less like an unreliable boy and more like...a femboy. Jun was absolutely into it.

"Omigossssh!!! I think I'm getting a new fetish omigosh omigosh omigosh omigosh omigosh omigosh omigosh OMIGOSH..."

The poor thing seemed to have broken the part of her brain that handled speech. Once Jun got her turn to photograph Kotobuki with Kai in his Shirou Kotomine costume...

"I'm no fujoshi, but I could go for this! My new OTP! Omigosh omigosh omigosh!"

"Please stop! A pairing between Caules and Shirou would be ridiculous!" Kotobuki, who had a bit of a taste for BL, gave a fiery argument. "Caules's OTP is obviously with Lord El-Melloi II!"

She clearly had strong opinions on the subject, so out of fear for his life, Kai decided not to touch that one.

When they finished round four of their group cosplay marathon, they noticed it was already past 2 p.m. They decided to take a lunch break, so they all brought out packed lunches and shared their sides amongst themselves. The three were itching to go back to cosplaying, so they scarfed their meals down at record pace.

Next was round five, the *Demon Slayer* cosplay. Kai split up from the girls to dress up as Tanjiro. He put on his button-up shirt, pulled up his hakama, and donned his green checkered coat. His prop sword was a cheap toy sold just about anywhere, so the Hotei company was able to easily get him one. Sadly, recreating Tanjiro's trademark burn scar on his forehead required very specific

makeup expertise, so they'd have to make do without it. He planned to try editing the images later to see if he could add the scar digitally without it looking too unnatural, though.

"Man," grumbled Kai as he looked at the cool outfit he was wearing in the mirror. "I still look like I'm dressed for a shrine visit."

Was that something you could fix in image editing programs too? Was there a manliness slider he could crank up or something?

With such nonsense on his mind, Kai made his way toward the meeting spot. To match the setting of the series, they chose one of the Japanese-style rooms that had a patio facing the garden out back. Kai was the first to arrive, so he opened the shutters and waited for the others. Since nobody was looking, he got lost in practicing his Water Breathing, but he halted as soon as he felt a presence nearby.



“We’re ready, Nakamura.”

“You could’ve practiced your Water Breathing, you know.”

“I-I’d never do that just because I’m alone!” Kai’s voice cracked during his response as the two girls arrived.

Kotobuki was dressed as Shinobu, wearing her Slayer Corps uniform of a button-up with a hakama. She also had a hairpiece in the shape of a swallowtail butterfly, and its pattern was mirrored on her coat.

Jun was dressed as Kanroji, and true to the source material, she wore a super-short minidress made from the typical Slayer Corps uniform along with thigh-high socks. Kanroji’s boldly exposed cleavage that would have made even Hestia blush was filled out well by Jun’s voluminous bust. Hmm, yep, she didn’t need any pads. She actually wore a flesh-colored undershirt this time, but even knowing the truth didn’t stop Kai’s eyes from being glued to, well, them.

“...Nakamura?” Kotobuki realized what his gaze was focused on and faced him with a death glare. Kai hurriedly looked away.

“So, who shall we photograph first?” asked Kai as he strained himself to smile. For the past four rounds, they typically started with solo shots of Jun or Kotobuki, and then maybe took shots of Kai or took group shots in rotation. But not for round five.

“Let’s start with us two!”

“If you’d please.”

Jun affectionately sidled up to Kotobuki, and Kotobuki agreed without her usual disdain. Kai was suspicious and wondered what had gotten into her, but he didn’t have any reason to argue. When he pointed the smartphone camera at them, the two began posing while staying just as close to each other.

“Whoa,” said Kai unconsciously. The image displayed on his smartphone screen was nothing short of art.

Now that they’d made it to the fifth round, Kotobuki had finally loosened up. Shinobu exuded a complex aura; she was both gentle and stern, happy-go-lucky yet tinged with ennui, and mature with a dash of danger. Kotobuki was

knocking it out of the park! Kai had to wonder if she'd suddenly become a model.

Jun, meanwhile, was unrecognizable. No matter who she cosplayed before, from Ryuu to Kaguya to Atalante, she was still Jun. She single-mindedly threw up peace signs the whole time. But now, her poses and expressions had become unmistakably Kanroji's. Maybe because she was an easy character for Jun to play; Kanroji was boundlessly energetic and had an endearingly klutzy side to her.

"Lookin' good, you two!" encouraged Kai. He lost himself as he snapped the shutter repeatedly. Impassioned praise poured from his mouth as he begged for more expressions, more poses, and more everything for the camera. Jun and Kotobuki enjoyed themselves as they shined in the limelight. Something was different about this round from the previous four.

Let's rewind the clock a bit to after lunch, and move to the room where the girls dressed up in their *Demon Slayer* cosplays. It only had one full-length mirror, so they took turns using it. Jun was battling the forces of gravity to fit her bursting breasts into the costume's massive boob window (while also making them look nice).

To prepare for this group cosplay, Kotobuki gladly borrowed the manga and read it over, so she understood Kanroji's character even though she had yet to appear in the critically acclaimed anime that was currently airing. Despite being so popular that not a day went by without Kotobuki coming across new fanart of her online, Kanroji's charm was straightforward and understandable. And, unfortunately, she had to admit it was a character that suited Jun. She didn't want to think about how many pads she'd need to pull off that cosplay. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't jealous of how Jun had the goods ready to go.

Being slender is better if you want to cosplay, thought Kotobuki, but if you want boys to chase you, bigger is better. Like, if you had to choose. Or if Kai had to choose.

Her thoughts eventually spiraled into a grudge, and she even started glaring at Jun in resentment. Jun noticed Kotobuki's look in the mirror and spun around

to face her. She lifted up her breasts, showing them off in a way that emphasized their gravitational pull.

“Wanna touch ‘em?”

“I’m not into that.” She wasn’t into that questionable smile of Jun’s either.

“Just because I’m older doesn’t mean you need to be polite. All of my friends have asked to touch ‘em at least once out of curiosity.”

“Why, *thank you* for the humble brag.” Kotobuki turned away in a huff, but Jun was undeterred.

“Don’t worry, Hotey. Yours will get this big too. Give ‘em a year to start growing.”

“Is that true, are you certain you can look me in the eye and say it?” Kotobuki’s neck snapped forward as her glare locked on to Jun.

“Aha, gotcha to look at me again.”

“...Argh.” So that was her goal all along. These were the social skills of a normie. Kotobuki was frustrated to have been read like a book by someone just a year older.

“You know, Hotey,” continued Jun as she kept her mature smile. “I really have to thank you.”

“Huh? Where’s this coming from?” Kotobuki’s tone was accusatory, but Jun continued while bearing the weight of two celestial bodies in her hands.

“I’m an otaku too, so I’ve always wanted to cosplay. I wanted to do it a bunch as soon as I started earning money at a real job, but thanks to you, I get to live my dream that much sooner.”

“Oh...right, that. You don’t need to thank me. It’s a win-win for both of us.”

“Is it really? I was so excited last night that I barely slept a wink, and I’m so excited now that I can barely contain myself!”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.” Not that Kotobuki was aware of any incidence of Jun *actually* containing herself. But as Kotobuki’s sour mood continued, Jun looked saddened.

“Hotey,” asked Jun, “do you not like cosplaying with me?”

Her voice was wistful, her tone tugging at even Kotobuki’s heart. She gulped and tried to gauge Jun’s expression. There was a downcast look in her eyes, but not the same kind that an abandoned cat would have. Quite the opposite; she exhibited the willpower of a veteran cat who’d never let her owner find the body of its prey. Jun’s desire to befriend Kotobuki came with the acknowledgment that she didn’t *need* Kotobuki, which meant that if Kotobuki truly rejected her, then Jun would give up and quietly walk away. Not to mourn her own loneliness, but out of consideration for Kotobuki.

That’s the story her eyes told; and if she was acting, then she could land a leading role on any film set in the country. But that couldn’t be the case. Jun didn’t seem like the type to have a hidden side to her. That’s why Kotobuki felt a pang of sadness in her heart. That’s why the response she would give had to be sincere. She couldn’t be childish forever.

Kotobuki gave her a smile and answered.

“I never said I hated it.”

For Kotobuki, cosplay was a hobby she always enjoyed alone. Her mom made the costumes and took pictures to remember them by, but it was hard to escape the feeling that it was still a solitary pursuit. She always wanted to be part of a group cosplay, but she was too much of a coward to reveal to her friends that she cosplayed in the first place.

And today, she finally got to live that dream. She couldn’t possibly hate it. But she was still an emotional trainwreck, so she treated Jun with her usual obnoxious deflections. The idea of coming clean with her emotions made her so embarrassed that her eyes rolled back in her head. She couldn’t blame anyone for sneering at her. Even Jun was smiling. But it was a smile that contained zero percent derision and one hundred percent joy.

“Good! So, okay, Hotey, I got an idea!”

“V-Very well, I’ll hear it.”

“How about I cosplay for real this time?”

“Are you really saying this *now*?!”

“I said I could barely contain myself, didn’t I? But now I wanna give this a fair shot. Like, take it to the next level. And honestly, I wanna show Kai up for all that crap about how I’m ‘not Ryu’ or ‘not Kaguya.’”

“Well, it *is* Nakamura.”

“Yeah, he always sweats the small stuff. He’s always complaining, even though he can’t even look at my cosplay without blushing.”

“...Well, it *is* Nakamura.”

“So this time, let’s really play out Kanroji and Shinobu. Let’s be a team from the very first shot.”

That would make it even more fun. It would be so much more fun together. That’s what Jun was really trying to say, so Kotobuki looked her in the eyes and nodded. She was sure she didn’t need words to get across what she wanted to say the most.

“Sweet! Now let’s make this cosplay our best one yet!” Jun turned back to the mirror and resumed her battle against gravity by searching for the perfect cleavage configuration.

“Right, and we can’t do that if we’re losing to Nakamura’s Tanjiro.”

“Nah, I bet Kai’ll look like he’s ready for a shrine visit.”

“Preposterous. After all, his Welf was flawless.”

“Hotey, honey... Do you need brain surgery?”

“At least tell me I need an eye exam instead...”

And so, that led to this cosplay shoot. The girls gave an earnest attempt to play as their idols, with Kotobuki being more like Shinobu and Jun being more like Kanroji. Well, it was by no means anything profound; in playing as their favorite characters, a part of that character became them. And of course, that

was a lot of fun. Their passion was contagious, and Kai pressed the shutter button more rapidly than he had all day.

“Sick sick sick sick you two are *killing* it! Expressions are killer, poses are killer, you’re so in character it’s crazy. You’re like, crazy cute. Like, crazy. It’s all sick. You’re *killing* it!”

The poor thing seemed to have broken the part of his brain that handled speech. After seeing Kai in such a state, Jun shot Kotobuki a message through eye contact.

He’s easy to please.

Kotobuki returned with an eye contact message of her own.

Well, it is Nakamura.

And as though on cue, the two burst out in laughter at the same time. It took a while for them to settle down. When they finally came to their senses—whether they were still Shinobu and Kanroji or not—they were smiling together.

Epilogue

The sixth and seventh cosplay rounds that followed were a lot of fun as well. Mrs. Hotei exceeded their expectations and had burned the midnight oil to produce seven entire costumes per person in time for the shoot. They cosplayed their hearts out and took every promotional photo the company could possibly need. By the time they started packing up, it was already nighttime. They really played the day away.

Mrs. Hotei picked the three up and took them to a family restaurant for a celebratory dinner. While there was naturally no alcohol involved, they all talked and laughed with great cheer. They had no shortage of subjects to discuss, such as how Kai kept sneaking glances at Kaguya's chest, or how Kai kept sneaking glances at Kanroji's chest, or how Kai kept sneaking glances at Shion's chest.

Kai had some mistakes to reflect on.

After he got home, the leftover exhilaration made it hard to fall asleep, but the satisfying soreness running through his body gradually brought him to the world of slumber. The next day was a Sunday so he would've loved nothing more than to just sleep in until noon, but sadly the work shift he had first thing in the morning meant that wouldn't be possible. He shared this shift with Kotobuki, and once they opened, they had to put in a hard day's work. Saying they were tired from the day before wouldn't cut it as an excuse.

And so, it was time for their afternoon break. Kai followed Kotobuki to Mitsuba, a hole-in-the-wall eatery about five minutes away. Kotobuki had suggested it that morning over LINE.

"I must thank you for yesterday, Nakamura."

"Oh no, if anything, the gratitude should come from me."

"My parents were quite pleased with our results. They said that each photo

was lively and wonderful.”

“That’s a relief to hear. It’s important to please one’s sponsor.”

“Heh, you’re quite right. There’s still the job of selecting which photos to use, however.”

“Allow me to help. I’m certain it must be a massive undertaking.”

“Oh, please do, Nakamura.”

“Then I shall. I’m sure it will be a job I’ll very much enjoy.”

The pair walked side by side down the cramped sidewalk, cutting across big streets and small alleys. They chatted idly to fill the time as they traveled at a leisurely pace, one that met the speed of Kotobuki’s gait.

“Nakamura, in addition to that request...I have something serious that I’d like to discuss.”

Due to their height differences, Kotobuki looked up at Kai as she changed the subject.

I see, realized Kai. It’s something she couldn’t talk about at Beaver. She must’ve invited me to Mitsuba just to get us away from there.

“Very well,” he said as he straightened his posture. “Go right ahead.”

“I had a lot of fun yesterday. I truly did.”

“And...this is a serious discussion?”

“Please, let me continue. It wasn’t long ago that we played games together with Miyakawa, correct? I truly don’t mean to say that I didn’t enjoy that day at all...but if I were to be perfectly honest, it was rather exhausting. Not through any fault of yours, of course. Far from it; you did more than I could ever ask for to make me feel welcome... I wonder if video games simply aren’t for me.”

“Well, we all have our likes and dislikes.” Kai considered it a shame, but hobbies weren’t something to be forced on others.

“So, could the three of us perhaps cosplay again sometime? I think it’d be nice if we could do it once a month. My mother would go all out for a costume that was challenging enough.”

“Why, that sounds like a dream come true. I’m certain Jun would be thrilled as well.”

“And I’d like to view more anime together. As well as go see movies. *Promare*’s been receiving high praise, you know.”

“Would you mind if Jun joined us for those as well?”

“Not at all. In fact, it’d feel a tad lonely without her.”

Kai blinked, wondering what in the world had gotten into her.

“I mean what I asked. My requests no longer have an ulterior motive.”

“Which is to say you’ve had ulterior motives before?”

“A slip of the tongue.” Kotobuki playfully stuck her tongue out. She was a mischievous little devil. “Anyway, I find Miyakawa a rather fascinating person. She’s quite fun to have around.”

“I know, right?”

“As such, I can fully understand your feelings.”

“Which feelings specifically, may I ask?”

“The feeling that it’s more enjoyable to play together without a care in the world than it is to strain yourself to date someone. That a friend is more valuable than a lover. And that I have some growing up to do.”

Kotobuki then paused, as though to lead into her final question. Kai had a hunch that he knew what it would be, but he lended an ear anyway. Eventually, Kotobuki came out and said it.

“Kai, I can’t be your lover. Perhaps we could just be friends?”

Just as Kai figured.

“Hm. Does this mean that I was the one who got dumped?” Kai joked before bursting out in laughter. “But I must say, I can’t help but laugh at how cliché your method of rejection is.”

“Wh-What choice did I have? There was simply no other way to phrase it. The

fact that this saying has survived for so many generations means that it must speak to a universal truth.”

“That it certainly does.” Kai laughed joyously once again. He felt like a weight had been taken off his shoulders. He decided that whatever he ordered for lunch would be an extra large. The uninhabited alley that led to Mitsuba suddenly seemed just a little brighter than moments ago.

Just then, Kotobuki took his right hand in hers, holding it as they continued to walk. Surprised, Kai looked over to discern what she was thinking, but Kotobuki just looked straight ahead and pretended not to notice. In fact, Kotobuki doubled down by intertwining her fingers with his. It was the infamous lover’s hand-holding.

“May I ask what this is, Kotobuki?” Kai gave up and asked the question. His eyes had squinted into a glare. But Kotobuki kept her eyes on the horizon and gave a firm answer.

“I’m merely holding your hand as a friend. Is there any problem?”

“*This* is what you do as a friend?”

“Yes. You do the same with Jun, do you not? I’ve heard as much.”

“I have never once walked while holding Jun’s hand!”

“And what of the *other* things you do as friends?”

“...”



“And what of the *other* things you do?”

“I’ve never walked while holding Jun’s hand, but this might be fairly normal among friends.”

“Of course it is.”

Kai’s obnoxious coworker spoke with the smugness of a sore winner. He couldn’t even object; her palm was so smooth, and the fingers that wrapped tightly around his were so slender. They were so feminine. The sensation in his right hand was so powerful that he couldn’t look her in the eye.

Yes, the tables had turned. This time, *he* was the one who couldn’t bear to face Kotobuki.

Afterword

Hello everyone, a pleasure to see you again. It's me, Akamitsu Awamura. I give you my sincerest thanks for picking up volume 2.

The world's really changed a lot lately... I pray from the bottom of my heart that you all can keep up your physical, mental, and financial health throughout this coronavirus mess. Having you all pray for the safety of my loved ones has meant more to me than I could possibly say.

I'll refrain from saying too much and instead use this space to offer my thanks. First, to my illustrator, mmu, for adorably drawing the emotional trainwreck Kotobuki flinching in fear at a horror movie for the cover illustration. Kotobuki's character design is gorgeous when she's calm, so I can't get enough of the gap between that and her expression there. Second, I thank my editor, Myzo, for providing consistently excellent assistance even during this limiting period of working from home. I hope that everyone at GA Bunko can stay strong throughout this coronavirus mess. I'm rooting for you, so I'll stay strong as well.

And of course, to every single reader who has picked up this book: with the strongest prayers I can send from Hiroshima, please be well! And thank you very much!

I truly hope we can meet again in volume 3. The alternative isn't gonna be pretty given the state of things, so I truly hope...

Akamitsu Awamura

Illustrator: mmu

She's the
Cutest...
But We're
Just
Friends!

2





Kai and Kotobuki
go on a **trial date?!
Can they close the
delicate distance of
almost darlings?
Or...should they?**

She
probably wants
to hold hands...
But we're not
actually boyfriend
and girlfriend yet.
Or is holding hands
not that big a deal?
It's not like we're
kissing, so maybe
it counts as part
of the trial?



Just take
these...
And then
do this...

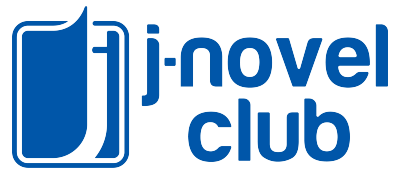
Hmm,
yes, very
interesting...

Wh-what the heck led to this?
Was Kai's room heaven? Or a vision of hell?



Gaaaaaaah,
I'm jealooooooooous!

I wish I had
what they have!



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2

by Akamitsu Awamura

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